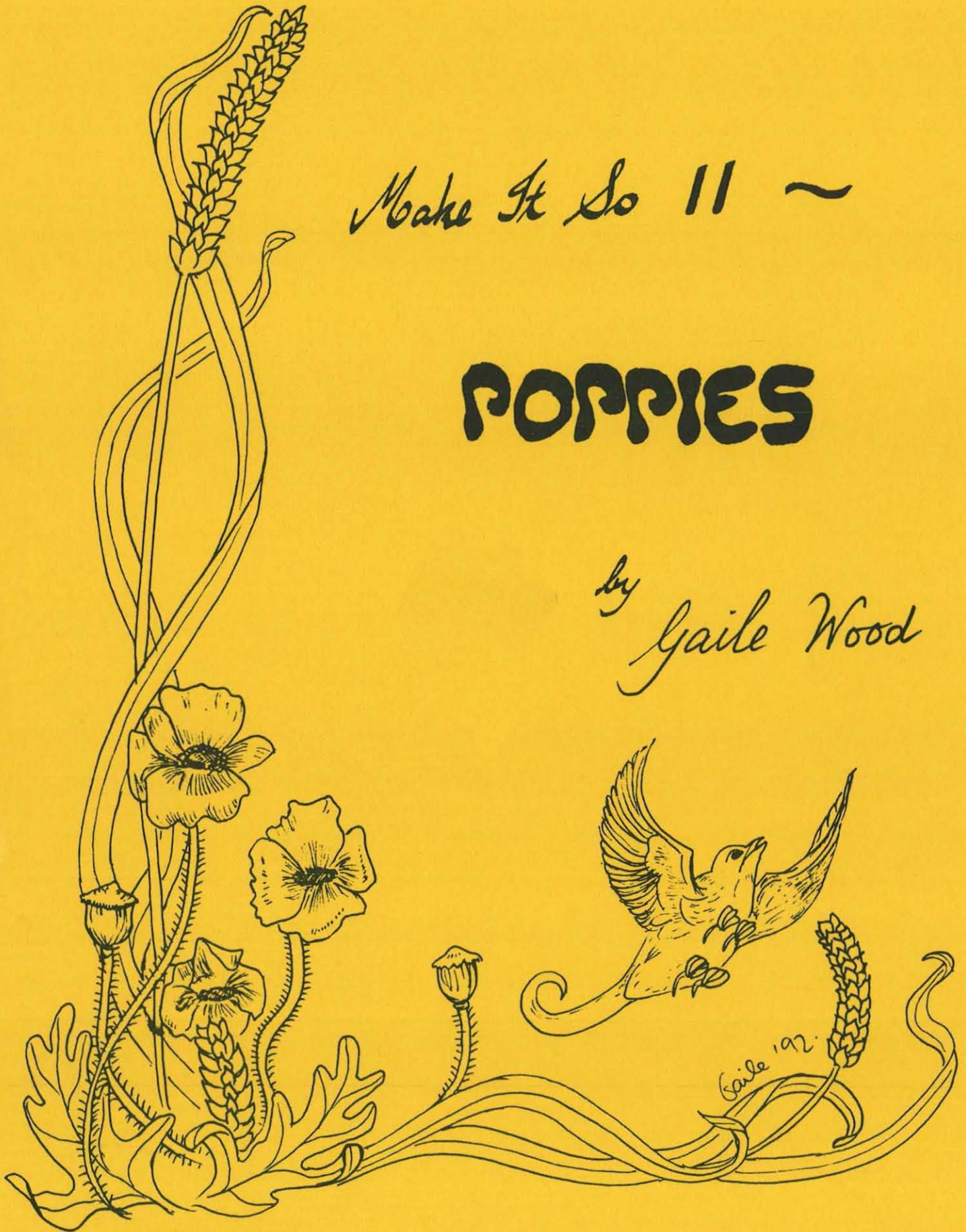


Sciopress

Make It So II ~

POPPIES

by
Gaile Wood



*a Star Trek
fantasy*

POPPIES

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POPPIES

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"That?" The tone issuing from the Security Chief's mouth was incredulous, and when he realized all present had focused their attention on him, continued in more modulated accents, "That is a flower."

"Yes, Worf," agreed Dr. Crusher. She pushed the clear, acrylic box into the centre of the table so the staff were able to examine it in detail. Inside the box in a stasis field was a flower. A very special type of flower. With the help of the drug distilled from this plant the lives of colonists on new planets would be made very much simpler.

Picard leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. He took a much closer look. "Poppy," he murmured.

Indeed, the plant did resemble the Terran flower for which it was nicknamed - but in form only. The petals were a softly luminous moon-shimmer, and both leaves and stem were reddish-bronze studded with a thick coarse covering of hair. By day the flower head retracted into scales, which covered it completely to protect those delectable petals from the ravages of the herbivores native to its world.

Drawing back from his close scrutiny, the Captain searched the Doctor's face. "Hmm. Starfleet Command believe this to be the source of all of the trouble," he stated for the benefit of his officers. "It seems the Ferengi have obtained exclusive rights to the drug distilled from the poppies, and although the Injaabii were at first content with this arrangement, they have now requested the aid of the Federation in ridding themselves of their profiteering one-time partners."

Riker tilted his head on one side, regarding the plant in its box. "Who else is going to be there?"

"Ambassador Lelltorin and her staff have been present on Injaab for the past six months, but have met with very little success in dealing with the planet's leaders," Picard said. He rubbed his forehead in an abstracted manner, and rose to look out of the observation lounge windows. "Our job is to ensure there is no treachery from the Ferengi."

There was a snort from Worf, and Picard said, "I couldn't agree more. But somebody has to do it, and it is to us the lot has fallen." He turned to face his staff, and addressed Dr. Crusher. "Would you explain the significance of the poppy, please, Doctor."

Crusher nodded, and stood to activate the small screen at the opposite end of the room. Picking up a datapad she read what it displayed before addressing the room as a whole and, thrusting one hand into the depths of a pocket in the jacket she wore, said, "As you can see, the chemical structure of the drug distilled from the poppy resembles to some extent opiates with the exception of the arrangement of certain molecules - " She broke off as she realised that with the possible exception of Data she had left them floundering. "I digress. Anyway, the drug has certain properties which make it similar to antibiotics in action, but even though it has certain familial ties with the opiates, it is completely non-addictive. As you can imagine, such a drug is immensely valuable to the Injaabii, and has indeed become the planet's almost

solitary source of income." The Doctor changed the display on the screen. "This is the drug - " she pointed at the chemical structure on the screen which flashed a lurid green - "and this is the problem."

Superimposed on the green was an equally lurid purple, but although at first sight they seemed to be the same, they were not. Data piped up. "There have been modifications to the structure, Doctor. What effect would the addition of two molecules of oxygen, three of cobalt and two of copper have?"

"Disastrous, Data," responded Crusher seriously. She flicked her auburn hair over her shoulder and, putting the datapad back on the table, ran her fingers nervously through its length. "What you see up there is the galaxy's most effective artificial pheromone."

Everybody regarded the innocuous-appearing flower with more interest, and Riker cleared his throat. "Really?"

The single word was loaded with questions and the Doctor rushed to continue. "Yes, this pheromone is almost exclusively metabolized by the warm-blooded species of the Federation, and the effects are... um... *startling* on the males of those species."

Worf growled, "Which species?"

Crusher sighed, and regarded the Klingon. "Human, Andorian, Vulcan, Klingon - the list is endless. Of course, some it effects more adversely than others, by heightening the aggressive tendencies inherent in most of these species." She eyed him apologetically. "Klingons are highly combative, and indications are that your people are among the worst affected."

Worf's hackles instantly rose, but before he could comment, Riker interrupted. "The Ferengi's control of the drug - What's it known as?"

"Tretharian," supplied Crusher promptly.

Riker continued, "So, the Ferengi control the supply of Tretharian, and they also know about this other use for it?"

"Yes," stated Crusher. "The Injaabii have requested our assistance to solve a problem which has arisen among the population." She fidgeted, then continued. "There has been a rise in the rate of infant deaths, and insanity heralded by sterility in the adult female population. Socially, for the Injaabii this is a calamity as the women are where the true power resides."

Troi made her first contribution. "I see." She drew her brows together in a frown. "And the difficulty for the diplomatic mission is heightened by the Injaabii females never speaking to any other than through their official mouthpieces."

"Plus the known Ferengi intransigence towards females of any species," Picard added, and shared a look with his staff which spoke volumes. "So you see, ladies, gentlemen, the Enterprise's role in this is more than would first appear."

The First Officer leaned back in his chair, then rested one ankle on a knee, regarding Picard as he came back to the head of the table to reseal himself. "I gather we're to be instrumental in helping the diplomats get through to the real leaders of Injaab, as well as policing the area for trouble."



"Well - " the Captain regarded his First steadily - "we won't be alone. There will be other Federation ships available should matters get out of hand. All members of the Federation have an interest in the outcome of this affair because of the effects Tretharian in its altered state is known to have." Picard meshed his fingers together, and went on, "I am going to have to head an away team - " the Captain managed to disregard the stubborn look Riker bestowed on him - "and I am going to need Counselor Troi as well as Dr. Crusher and Commander Data."

"Sir, I protest," Worf said bluntly. "You will be going into a potentially hazardous situation, and you will need Security."

Riker leaned forward to speak earnestly. "I agree. And I must point out, sir, that it is my job to - "

Picard waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, Number One. I believe we have had this argument before on numerous occasions. It is imperative that it is I who head the away team, as the N'Chal will not countenance contact through someone of lesser authority." Picard turned his attention to Worf. "Yes, Lieutenant, it is true I will be in potential danger. If you can provide a male member of Security who also happens to be a eunuch then I will take him with me."

Worf frowned. "A - eunuch? I do not understand, sir."

Picard sighed, and said, "Data, would you care to elucidate?"

The android nodded his head. "Yes, sir." Then swinging his chair so he faced Worf squarely, continued, "The Injaabii social structure is arranged thus: at the top are the females who have no dealings with their mates other than those required to reproduce the species. Therefore, this has necessitated the auspices of an intermediary - the eunuch. In Injaabii society the 'challai' perform this function as they are neither male or female, and have status within both male and female hierarchies enabling commerce concerning the state, or health, or breeding - "

"Thank you, Commander," interrupted Picard hastily. He turned to Worf. "You see our difficulty?"

Worf had listened with rising disbelief. "How are you to gain access to such a person, sir?" he asked.

"Ah," said the Captain. "Ambassador Lelltorin has already in her services two such individuals."

Riker chewed a thumb thoughtfully, then raising his head spoke slowly. "Even if I accept that I cannot take your place this time - what is your role, sir?"

"A female without a mate - such as Ambassador Lelltorin - has very little voice even with challai, and a male without a - " Picard paused for a moment, his expression indicating what he was about to say next he found slightly distasteful - "harem has no status at all. Therefore, the Ambassador, myself, Dr. Crusher and Counselor Troi should form a group with the two challai which will be acceptable as a means of getting the diplomatic talks off the ground. As well as being - " he smiled at Crusher - "the starting point for solving the Injaabii medical problems."

"How many wives should you have?" asked Crusher innocently. She plonked herself down in a chair, and returned Picard's smile with a wry twist to her mouth as she propped her

head on long fingers.

Embarrassed, the Captain cleared his throat. "Oh... three should be sufficient, Doctor," he said.

"Are you sure?" This last was said so sweetly that everybody looked at Crusher in expectation.

"Yes," stated Picard firmly, and glared at Crusher in an attempt to quell her sense of humour.

"Actually," Data said helpfully, "three is the minimum number a male can possess to have recognizable standing. It is because of the Captain's alien status that the N'Chal has agreed to speak to a challai of the household with a male so low in the..." The android trailed off uncertainly. Commander Riker was grinning at him, as was Dr. Crusher. Counselor Troi had a hand over her mouth, and Worf glowered furiously. So did the Captain. It was then Data realized he had committed a faux pas of outstanding proportions although he was not certain how.

Coldly, Picard said, "Thank you, Commander."

They were all saved from further conversation by the timely interruption of a male voice. "Captain, we are approaching Injaab V and will achieve orbit in 13.22 minutes."

Picard looked up from his steady regard of the unfortunate Data. "Thank you, Ensign." Then he exited swiftly from the observation lounge, his officers following in his footsteps.

Descending the ramp, Picard moved to his chair and settled in to watch the planet draw near. At first a pinprick of light was all to be seen on the main viewscreen, and then, as the Enterprise sailed into the outer reaches of the Injaabii system, their destination swelled into pearly splendour.

Here and there tinged with gold and bronze, Injaab was a lovely world to behold from the depths of space. The planet's name, as well as translating to 'world', had the second meaning of 'night-jewel'.

Particularly apt, thought Picard.

The Ensign at the con disturbed his thoughts by announcing, "Standard orbit executed, sir."

"Very good, Ensign. Mr. Worf, open communications with Ambassador Lelltorin," ordered Picard.

"Aye, sir," said Worf. The Klingon moved his hands across the console with sure swiftness, finally announcing, "Communication channel open now, Captain."

The view of Injaab was replaced by the interior of a light, airy room luxuriously ornamented with festoons of brightly coloured silks. On the floor was a thick rug, reminiscent of Earth's ancient Persia, handwoven in the classical Injaabii style in rich reds and bronze.

The room was partitioned at one end by a heavy curtain which was moved apart by two servants, and through it and up to the screen walked a gracious female figure. She was dressed in the Injaabii manner: flowing diaphanous robes of sky-blue and silver shot with bronze

covering her from neck to foot, but leaving little to the imagination as they shifted and clung like a living thing to her form. Heavily veiled and masked, she drew to a halt, staring out of the viewscreen at the Enterprise's bridge.

Through the veils, Picard watched a generous mouth curve into a smile, and slender hands - the fingers and palms dyed to match her clothing - reach to remove the mask which covered the upper part of her face. As the mask came free she released an audible sigh of relief and shook out bright silver hair to cloud about her shoulders. Setting the mask and its attached veils with a flourish on the table to the right of her, Ambassador Lelltorin greeted the Captain in a familiar purr. "Jean-Luc, how wonderful to see you again."

Picard started as recognition pierced him. "Good Grief! Felicity?" Uncertain how to continue, and acutely aware of the interest his staff were starting to take, Picard gathered his wits and went on hurriedly. "Ambassador Lelltorin, I am delighted to make your acquaintance again - although one could wish for more pleasant circumstances."

"Hmm. The feeling is mutual, I assure you, Jean-Luc." She glanced over her shoulder at a servant standing just to the rear of her, making a rapid gesture with her hand. He scurried to obey and brought a seat into which she reclined gracefully. "Let's get down to business, Captain," she said, and arranged her robes about her person decorously. Satisfied, she looked up and her eyes were hard. "The problem is worse than we thought, Jean-Luc. The damned Ferengi have insulted the N'Chal by attempting to speak directly to her, and now she will not consider an approach by me at all. I needed you here a week ago - then I might have been able to salvage the progress we'd started to make - but now - " Lelltorin shrugged expressively - "God only knows how we'll get on a better footing."

Riker leaned forward, "How, ma'am, did the Ferengi get a foot in the door anyway when the N'Chal won't talk to males?"

The Ambassador gave a short laugh, but was not even remotely amused. "You can blame that on the ruddy men. They were in such a hurry to get the artificial pheromone they did a little dealing on their own with the Ferengi - otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"They broke out of their traditional role?" asked Troi in surprise.

"Oh yes. Indeed they did," said Lelltorin grimly. "Tretharian may not be addictive in its original state - but altered it locks into the oxygen bearing molecules of the blood and becomes necessary for life. And of course the Ferengi neglected to pass on this interesting piece of information, and thus have the Injaabii in thrall. As neat a piece of trickery as I have ever had the misfortune to come across."

The Ambassador stood and rubbed her eyes wearily. She paced for a little while, then came to a halt. "Jean-Luc, the Federation has dragged its heels over this affair for far too long, and the situation may well be unretrievable. A case of too little, too late."

Picard shook his head. "No," he said, "I refuse to believe we are wasting our time. Are you able to come aboard for a meeting to discuss the alternatives? We will find some way of ousting the Ferengi from this world."

"I hope so, Jean-Luc. Time is running out for the Injaabii." Lelltorin waved a tinted palm. "Yes, I would be pleased to discuss the alternatives as I can't go anywhere at the moment, so if you could, arrange for me to be transported aboard. Oh, I'll be bringing Dallra, my native adviser." As she turned to go, she stopped as something sprang back into her

memory. "There's a feast in your honour tomorrow evening. The Surajh is arranging it."

The screen went blank, and became full of the view of Injaab once more. Picard stared thoughtfully at the screen for a moment or two, then tapped his communicator. "Mr. O'Brien, please arrange to transport Ambassador Lelltorin and her aide aboard. Mr. Worf, come with me. Commander, you have the bridge."

The Captain and Worf watched the transporter beam coalesce into two figures. Picard stepped forward to greet the Ambassador with his hand extended.

Moving off the platform, she crossed swiftly to where the Captain stood. "Jean-Luc, always so formal," she husked, and ignoring the extended hand, reached her arms around Picard's neck, greeting him in a manner she felt more fitting for old friends. She kissed him enthusiastically on the mouth.

O'Brien and Worf studiously avoided looking at them, but exchanged glances of amazement with one another.

The Captain stiffened and, gently but firmly, pushed Ambassador Lelltorin away. "Fliss," he admonished, clearing his throat and thoroughly disconcerted, "please."

She grinned, and indicated the native male who still stood on the transporter pad watching with wary intensity. "Captain Picard, allow me to introduce the head of my official Injaabii household. Dallra."

Dallra bent awkwardly from his waist in a movement which seemed most unnatural, and reached the palms of four-fingered hands forward in a curious salute.

"Captain," he said. His modulation was a pleasant tenor, and his accent flawless. The Injaabii rose to his full height and gazed with fathomless black-in-black eyes at Picard.

Lelltorin said, "Dallra is challai. Aren't you, cha'?"

Again that curious salute. "Mistress."

"Cha' is a friend also, Jean-Luc," Lelltorin assured Picard, but this last was more for the benefit of Worf who regarded the alien with suspicion.

The Captain nodded. "Worf, take Dallra - "

"Gentle sir, I would prefer you call me cha'." Dallra bent and saluted Picard again, apologetic for the interruption. As he straightened the Captain briefly saw nictitating membranes flash across his black eyes.

Lelltorin moved back to the Injaabii and took his arm. "Cha' will come with me." She patted the alien's arm with friendly reassurance. "Cha' is my right arm. It is thanks to Dallra we are still present on Injaab and have not been slung out on our ear."

"Hmm. I see. Ambassador, if you will come with us?"

Lelltorin sighed. "Jean-Luc, I think we've known each other long enough for you to call me Fliss without a serious breach of discipline occurring. Besides - " and her dark eyes flashed

with a teasing light - "we've a lot of catching up to do. Twelve years is a long time."

Conscious of O'Brien trying hard not to eavesdrop and Worf pretending to be a marble statue, Picard said, "Later, Ambassador - " changing the sentence reluctantly as he caught a mischievous glint cross her face - "Fliss. If you'll follow us."

Graciously, Lelltorin inclined her head, and together she and the Injaabii followed majestically in Picard's wake into the corridor.

O'Brien moved to the doors and poked his head out just far enough to see them disappearing around the curve of the passage. He would give his right arm to be a fly on the wall when those two chewed over the fat, he decided. He ducked back into the transporter room when Worf turned - alerted by his uncanny senses, knowing they were being watched - and went back to the work he had been doing before the arrival of the Ambassador. *It's a damn shame I can't tell anyone about this*, he thought regretfully.

Troi looked up and over to the turbolift as the doors swished open to discharge its contents. Her Captain appeared distinctly flustered, and the Ambassador was... amused? The Counselor stood as the party made their way down the ramp towards her and Riker, and still she could not make out the dominant emotion of Ambassador Lelltorin. The Captain spoke to her, and she snapped back to attention. "Yes, sir?"

Picard regarded her curiously. "Ambassador, this is Deanna Troi, our Ship's Counselor, and Commanders Riker and Data."

Lelltorin tilted her head in acknowledgement to the men, and smiled at Troi. "So you are to be Jean-Luc's wife?"

Troi returned the smile. "One of them," she said.

"Cha' will be pleased to have a proper household to act for," Lelltorin said, and Troi noticed properly for the first time the alien standing in their midst.

He was of slender build with a sinewy taut look in the way he carried himself, and, as he bowed to her and saluted, Troi caught a glimpse of very alien emotions. Alien - but not unpleasant, and he was fiercely loyal to the Ambassador.

Taking her hand between his own the Injaabii touched it to his chest in two different spots, then he released her. "Lady."

Troi regarded him more closely. Reddish-bronze skin, loose robes of the same blue as the Ambassador, narrow highly-arched bare feet and masses of thick black hair bound and tied carefully in an elaborate construction. In the hair glinted metallic ornaments of copper hue, and Dallra tensed slightly under her scrutiny.

"Has this unworthy given offence?" he inquired diffidently, and folded himself once more into the grotesque mockery of a bow.

"No - no!" Troi rushed to reassure him. "Please, don't do that."

Lelltorin said, "Cha', my friend, the Counselor wishes you would not bow."

"Ah," he said in understanding, and rose fluidly to the immense relief of those present.

"Injaabii do not have the same skeletal construction as most humanoids," Lelltorin explained, "and when they do that it looks wrong somehow. Until you get used to it, that is."

Picard said, "Mr. Worf, you have the bridge. Commanders, Counselor, Ambassador... cha' - if you would come to the observation lounge." The Captain headed to the lounge and the party went after him.

Once inside the room they all sat, the Injaabii gathering himself bonelessly onto a chair. The Enterprise officers watched with a kind of horrified fascination as he seemed to pour into the seat. Troi could not repress a small shudder of revulsion, and managed to avert her eyes.

Riker smiled at the Ambassador. *She really is a handsome woman*, he thought admiringly, and leant towards her resting his cheek on a closed fist. "Ambassador." The First Officer allowed his admiration to colour his voice. "How are we to gain an audience with the N'Chal?"

Felicity Lelltorin quirked a well-shaped brow at him as she recognized the tones, and pointed a slim finger at Dallra. "Cha' will make all the arrangements, Commander. That is not the worst of our problems, though. We do have the Ferengi to deal with, and they are a much worse threat because of the possible cessation of a lucrative little deal."

Data said, "Are you aware of the numbers of Ferengi present on Injaab, Ambassador?"

"Unknown," Lelltorin chewed the inside of her cheek. "The contact my office has had with them has been restricted. Literally to brushing against one another in corridors. I still don't know how they managed to speak to the N'Chal as they've disdained the services of the challai."

"What do you know of their machinations?" probed Data.

Lelltorin was silent, and shook her head regretfully. "I can tell you no more than I've already informed you. That they were instrumental in the making of this - " she searched for words - "witches' brew is obvious. There is a strong possibility their actions regarding the N'Chal were deliberate."

"To alienate any chance of contact between her and the Federation?" said Troi, and was rewarded by the Ambassador nodding her head, a quick staccato of agreement. "Then surely even if we do appear to her as a household, she still won't be interested."

"That is a possibility," admitted Lelltorin. "But the likelihood of her refusing is lessened greatly. Dallra has a formidable reputation as an orator. To coin an old phrase, cha' could charm the birds from the trees. With him and Lakri, the other cha' of my household, we have a slightly better than even chance."

"One more thing, Felicity," said Picard. "Where does Data fit in this?"

She regarded the android, and tipped her head to the side. "Hmm. A challai of an alien society, and therefore of value as an intermediary."

"But," protested Data, "I am not truly challai, Ambassador."

"Indeed?" Lelltorin arched her brows at the android. "Commander, in the eyes of the N'Chal you are a *thing* and not a male." She acknowledged a slight gesture from the Injaabii.

"Cha' has assured me of this." She smiled kindly at Data. "I do apologise for this attitude, but the Injaabii are an intransigent species."

"So, until cha' has arranged for a meeting with the N'Chal, all we can do is wait?" asked Riker.

"No," replied Lelltorin. "All *you* can do is wait. My sister wives must prepare themselves for an audience, and cha' Lakri will instruct them in protocol and dress befitting the wives of a fearless male such as Captain Picard."

"We will have to wear those robes?" Troi asked.

The Injaabii spoke for the first time. "Indeed, Lady. And it is most unseemly for the mates of a household to go unmasked."

"I apologise, my dear," said Lelltorin. "An unfortunate, but necessary, evil. When in Rome - "

"And this feast in my honour?" Picard interrupted impatiently.

"A mere male thing." Lelltorin was dismissive. "Cha' Lakri will act as your mouthpiece, and you may take your officers with you."

In some surprise Riker asked, "I am to go also?"

Cha' Dallra saluted Riker. "For you not to go would greatly insult the Surajh. The Captain must be accompanied by all he holds in favour - it will give honour to the Surajh and all who behold them."

"Mark my words, Jean-Luc, the Injaabii males are warriors, and you and yours must go dressed as such. Male hierarchies have a definite pecking order, and if you are less of a warrior than any of those present..." Lelltorin allowed her words to trail to a finish, and watched Picard for a reaction.

"Do we need instruction?" Riker wanted to know. "It seems to me Injaabii society is very complicated, and if we make a move out of place it could reflect badly on you, Ambassador."

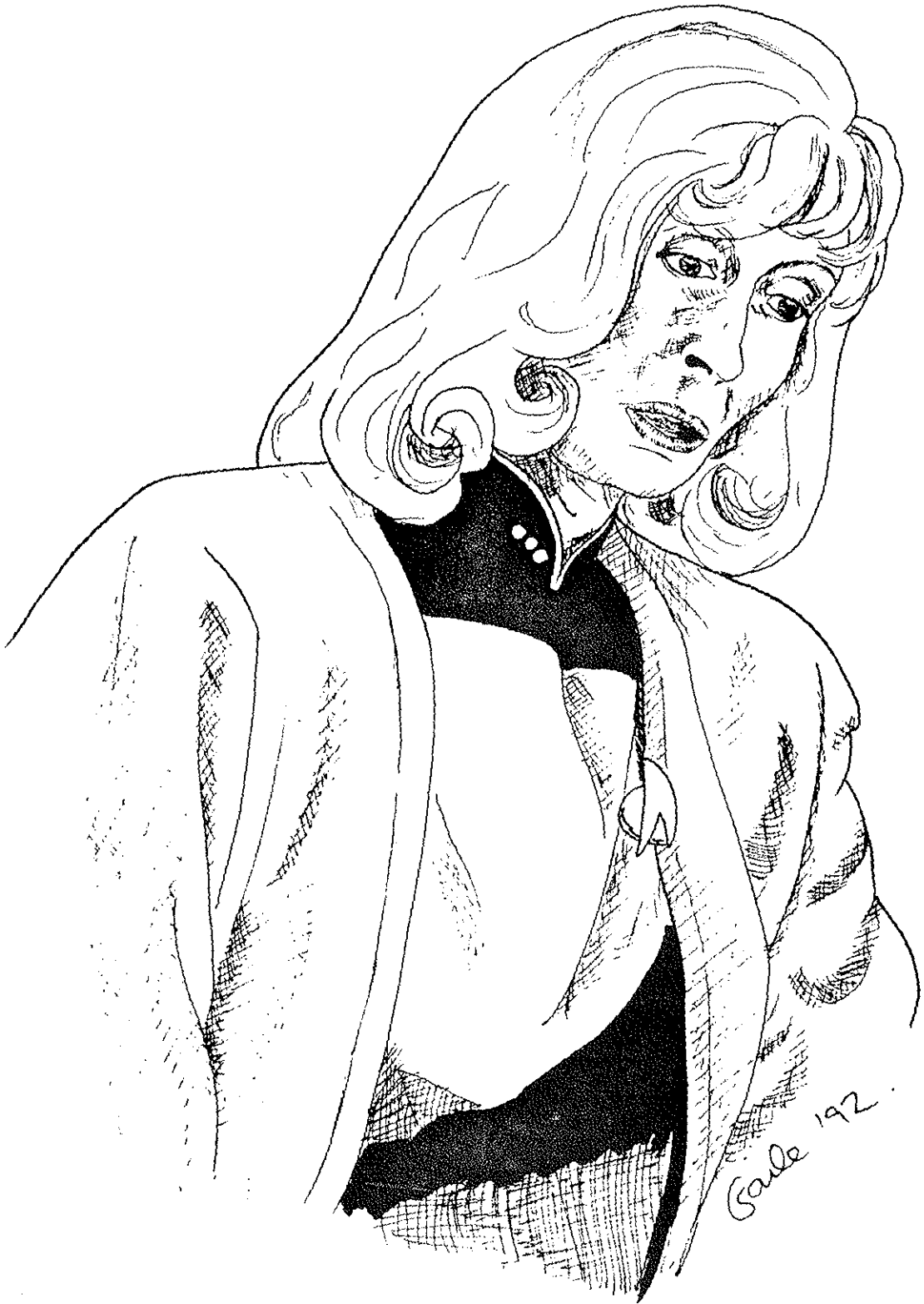
Lelltorin laughed softly. "Injaabii males are like males the galaxy over. They drink, and fight - " she waved her hands expressively - "given the chance. If in doubt, cha' Lakri will be available to cushion the blow. Use him - he will be invaluable to you. And some mistakes will be expected of you - you are alien to the culture. To understand the nuances you must be born Injaabii."

The Ambassador held out a tinted palm to both Troi and Picard. "Now I would meet with my other sister wife, and we must prepare ourselves."

As the door shut behind them, Riker stared thoughtfully at Data. "Anything to add, Commander?"

"Yes," said the android officer. "Am I invited to the banquet as well?"

Riker shrugged. "I don't think it's the kind of thing you'll enjoy, Data."



On that note, Riker left the observation room, leaving Data to make up his own mind.

Beverly Crusher gazed at the robes she was to wear with a kind of revolted resignation. There were a lot of them, and all the same thin, gauzy stuff Ambassador Lelltorin wore with such panache. Disgusted, she bundled them into a ball between the palms of her hands and threw them with palpable venom at the wall. "All of the damn things together wouldn't make a decent handkerchief," she complained loudly.

There was a muffled chuckle, and she glared at the perpetrator who was dressed in the acceptable Injaabii manner. "Oh yeah," Crusher said. "That's right. Laugh. Ha, ha. It's okay for you, Deanna. *You* look great in them - all they do for me is make me look like a... a... laughing stock!"

"Oh, Beverly. They do not - you're just too self-conscious in them. If you'd just relax, you'd be fine."

The door twittered, interrupting the Doctor as she prepared to launch another verbal assault on her friend. "Come."

Lelltorin walked through, and a step behind came Dallra, who got to his knees and salaamed. Then he busied himself about Crusher's quarters, and set some glasses on a table.

Crusher flung herself into a chair. "Ambassador, does he have to do that *every* time he comes into our presence?" Her voice was irritated.

Lelltorin set a bottle on the table; inside, a sparkling liquid sent bubbles up its neck. "Beverly, you must relax into your role, and I've brought the right sort of relaxant for you." So saying, she sat and tipped the bottle to pour a generous helping each for the three of them. Picking up her glass the Ambassador sipped appreciatively, and tapped its side with her forefinger. "Y'know, apart from the Tretharian, the Injaabii would do well to consider exporting this. It really is very good." Closing her eyes, she leaned back with a sigh and warmed the glass in her hands.

Troi joined the other two women, and took a hesitant drink from her glass. The Ambassador was right - it really was very good indeed - and the Counselor finished the wine so cha' Dallra could refill the glass for her. "How do you know Captain Picard?" she inquired curiously.

Beverly Crusher sat up with interest as the Ambassador opened her eyes and smiled. Lelltorin examined her nails with interest, and gave them both a wicked little look. "Are you certain you don't mean 'How *well* do you know him?'"

"Weelll," drawled the Doctor, "if we're to be sister wives I think we ought to dish the dirt - don't you, Ambassador?"

"Please, Beverly. Call me Fliss - Jean-Luc does."

"He does, does he?" Crusher tried the name experimentally on her tongue. "Fliss," she repeated. "Okay, how *well* do you know Jean-Luc?"

"About twelve years ago, I met him at one of those infernal dinner dances the diplomatic

corps has to attend. I was an assistant to the aide of the Ambassador of Aldebaran - a very minor cog - and he was the dashing Starfleet officer. So gallant, so charming. We met, we danced, and the rest - as they say - is history." Lelltorin held out her glass, and the Injaabii topped it up. "We were an item for about eight weeks, but you know these career men. The love of the job won over the love of a good woman." She sighed, and, as she caught the eyes of the other two women, gave a heavy snort of derision.

"Hmm?" asked Troi. The wine was starting to have a curiously mellowing effect on her; it was a most pleasant feeling.

"Not really," admitted Lelltorin. "Oh, the bit about meeting at a dinner dance and being an item is true enough, but we were *both* self-interested and career orientated. So nothing came of it - " she grinned wickedly, and held out her glass again - "but we had one hell of a good time!"

Crusher regarded the other woman. Generous mouth, dark eyes set in a face that could make no claims to beauty - but Lelltorin's hair was truly spectacular - spun silver, startling against olive skin, dark brows and lashes. "My husband, Jack, and the Captain were friends," she offered.

Lelltorin nodded, her eyes serious. "I know," she said. "Beverly, I would like to be your friend, and Deanna's, if you'll let me." When the other two nodded at her, she smiled. "Good." Then continued, "Jean-Luc never met my late husband. We met just after we'd concluded our liaison - Lelltorin was a good man - " She gazed at Crusher. "I miss him a great deal."

Beverly sighed in empathy. "I miss Jack, too."

The Ambassador patted her hand in a friendly fashion, and called, "Cha', bring over Beverly's robes, and we'll dress her now." She took the clothing from his hands, and gestured to Crusher to make her stand up.

Dallra came closer, then helped the Doctor out of her uniform and into the robes. He arranged them carefully on her body, and when he had made a few infinitesimal changes took her arm very gently by the elbow and led her to a mirror.

Beverly stared in surprise at the exotic stranger who stood in familiar surroundings - a glittering butterfly of a creature in a base metal setting - and turned slowly to watch the effect of the cloth whispering against her skin. Blue, silver and bronze dripped down her form, and made her truly beautiful.

"Relaxation," said the Ambassador, "was the key. You look... spectacular!"

Dallra spoke, intruding loudly into their reverie. "You must be masked, mesdames." He moved to a small bag he had brought with him, and from within he extracted the veils and masks all Injaabii women wore. These also had attached fine silvery strands, which on closer inspection turned out to be thin chains. They tinkled gently against one another, and he laid the dominoes on the table. Looking up, the Injaabii said, "This unworthy will now complete your dress."

He crossed to Troi, releasing her thick hair from its confines, then proceeded to dress it in the fashion Lelltorin wore hers. Binding it intricately, Dallra examined his handiwork critically, grunting at last with satisfaction, inserting copper ornaments to finish the total look. Then lifting veils, mask and chains he carefully placed it over her face. Turning to the Doctor he did the same and also to Lelltorin, until the three women stood before him reincarnated. He

clasped his hands together, and saluted them. Then he smiled, the first time Troi or Crusher had seen the challai do so. It was startling. Sharp, white canines flashed and were then covered again rapidly.

"Now," Dallra said, "you are truly sister wives."

"What's the significance of the chains?" asked Crusher as she fingered one of them.

"They represent a woman bound to a mate," responded Dallra. "You wear three because there are three wives."

"Er... cha'," Troi inquired, "how many wives may a male have?"

The Injaabii considered the question briefly. "As many as he is able to hold."

He indicated they should sit down, and he took a small bottle of dye from the bag along with a soft brush. Holding out his hand, Dallra waited until Crusher placed her own palm upwards in his. Then the challai painted her hand carefully, blotting any excess with a piece of cloth. When he had finished he did Troi's palms similarly. "Good," he announced finally. "Now I begin your instruction in customs."

Lelltorin glanced at the other two women sympathetically. "Heed cha' well," she said. "Cha' Dallra is a hard taskmaster and will expect nothing less than perfection." The Ambassador removed her mask. "I hate that damn thing," she muttered as she set it down and headed for the door.

"Where are you going, Fliss?" asked Crusher after she had finished scrutinizing her tinted hands.

The Ambassador half-turned towards her. "Just got to do a little catching up, Beverly - before our work begins in earnest."

Picard was resting quietly in his quarters reading a book when his door sounded, and sighing regretfully he called. "Come."

The Ambassador stood for a moment on the threshold. "Well?" she said. "Can I come in, or am I going to have to stand here all night?"

"Please," said the Captain and rose politely as she came into the living area. Behind her came another Injaabii. "Cha' Lakri?" he inquired.

The challai saluted him. "Sir."

As with Dallra, the challai's voice was a pleasant well-modulated tenor, and he was dressed as befitted his station in the Ambassador's household.

Lelltorin sat on the chair Picard indicated, moving past him in a silken rustle, and a gently drifting cloud of perfume.

Picard regarded her silently. "Fliss," he began, "you look wonderful, and I'm really delighted to see you again... but..."

Lelltorin nodded, and said, "Relax, Jean-Luc, I'm not here to make a pass at you." She tilted her argent head on one side to give him a sidelong glance from under lowered eyelids, and dropped her voice melodramatically. "Your virtue is safe with me - for the time being." Then her mouth twitched. "Purely business at the moment, my friend. Besides, cha' would be shocked rigid."

He cleared his throat. "Still the same, I see."

The Ambassador watched him. "I wish I could say the same for you, Jean-Luc. But perhaps you need some of the same relaxant I gave to Dr. Crusher?"

Picard smiled at her. "Indeed?" He sat at his desk. "How can I help you, Fliss?"

"When you go to the feast the Surajh has arranged in your... honour, I want you to insist on taking your 'wives' - " she looked apologetically at him - "so we'll be able to enter his seraglio, and Beverly can take a look at the illness first hand. It's pretty prevalent amongst his mates."

"You want *me* to insist?"

"Yes," she stated firmly. "It'll imply great trust in the Surajh - I'm sure you can figure out the implications, Captain." Lelltorin leaned forward. "Jean-Luc, just because they do not interact on a social level with their women does not mean the men are the same. Cha' here is simply to cover any outrageous blunders you might make. You *will* be expected to speak for yourselves, occasionally deferring to myself." She became thoughtful. "There are other reasons why us going to the banquet is a good idea. His First also happen to be the N'Chal's birth sister."

"I see." The Captain rested his chin on his hand. "What else do we need to know, Fliss?"

Lelltorin sat back rubbing her temples, and yawned. "Sorry," she said. "What else do you need to know? Cha'?"

Lakri stepped forward, and Picard turned his attention to the Injaabii. "Honoured sir," he began, "you will need to be dressed more fittingly, and you must carry a jilah. If you need to speak with the mistress, I will be the one to take your messages to her."

"Dress uniform?" inquired Picard, and received an affirmative nod from Lelltorin. "Er... what is a 'jilah'?"

"Ceremonial sword with a double edge," explained Lelltorin. "I must warn you, Jean-Luc, they are still used for rituals in the rites of manhood. And sometimes for castration or a beheading."

Alarmed, the Captain's brows rose. "Oh?"

The cha' Lakri took over. "Sir, this is only in extreme circumstances. Ceremonial castration was used only on captured males from other clans." Seeing the way the Captain's thoughts were leading him, Lakri explained further. "Such as I are made while we are still babes in arms. It is an honour for our fathers to have challai as offspring."

Seeing Picard's face become closed and set, Lelltorin decided to interrupt. "What do you think, Jean-Luc? That this is a barbarous custom - yes?" As Picard nodded curtly, acutely aware of the Injaabii standing close by, she glared at him. "Not so, Captain. The Injaabii are

litter bearers of four or five offspring. Of those three will be male, thus creating a surplus. Rather than cull their offspring outright, the challai were created centuries ago and have since found a very special place in their society. Without them, the Injaabii people would not have achieved space flight or peace."

"Another man's meat?"

"Precisely, Jean-Luc." Lelltorin turned to Lakri. "You may leave us now, cha'."

The Injaabii swept a bow in the fluid way of his people, and made his way out of Picard's quarters. The two Humans watched him leave, the Captain fascinated by the way Lakri moved - his narrow feet with their four toes barely seemed to touch the carpet.

"An intriguing people, Felicity. We know so little about them, yet they supply the Federation with Tretharian with apparently no interest in commerce with us."

"Until now," said Lelltorin.

"Until now," echoed Picard, and shared a look with Lelltorin. Her face was calm, but her eyes showed the strain and worry of the past months.

"And if we cannot help them, Captain, I fear the Injaabii will be another casualty in the Ferengi search for an easy profit and conquest." She got up, moving to the food slot. "May I?" she asked, and when Picard nodded agreement, ordered tea and a snack for them both. Sitting back down, Lelltorin picked up the orange on the tray and started to peel it. "It would be a good idea to contact the Surajh as soon as possible, Jean-Luc. Tonight is a very good time - now, even."

Picard regarded her, and tapped his insignia. "Picard to Worf."

"Captain?"

"Open a channel to the Surajh - " the Captain stopped and glanced at Lelltorin. "Does he have another name?"

"Heratt," she supplied.

" - to Surajh Heratt. Inform me when you have reached him. Oh, Lieutenant, it is imperative that *I* speak to the Surajh, and no-one else. Insist on it please, Worf."

"Very good, sir," Worf replied and signed off.

"Firm enough, Fliss?" asked Picard with more than a hint of dryness.

"Should just about do, Jean-Luc, I think," Lelltorin said, and bit into the now peeled orange segment held daintily between her fingers. As the juice ran down her hand, she licked it up with relish. Catching the interested look he was giving her, she gave a little laugh. "Sometimes," she explained, "being an Ambassador is a definite minus, particularly where food is concerned. If you ever saw some of the outlandish things we have to consume in the name of goodwill..." The Ambassador shook her head. "I forget - you will have that pleasure tomorrow evening."

Picard smiled. "That bad?"

"On the contrary," she said. "It's generally pretty good. But you hanker after Terran things occasionally."

"Food replicators?"

"Of course. But I don't often eat at home." Lelltorin shrugged, continuing to eat her orange, and the Captain poured them both tea from the pot as they waited for Worf to contact them again.

They were into their third cup when his deep voice interrupted the quiet discussion they were having about where and what the other had been doing for the past twelve years.

"Yes?" Picard tugged his uniform into place.

"The Surajh Heratt awaits you, sir."

"On my way, Lieutenant. Picard out." He regarded Lelltorin. "Do you have to be present?"

"No, Jean-Luc. It would be... inappropriate." Lelltorin continued to relax, obviously at ease in the Captain's quarters and ate one of the sticky pastries she had requested. "I'll wait here for you."

Picard eyed her. "I thought you might." On that cryptic statement, he turned on his heel to step smartly into the corridor.

Lelltorin stared after him thoughtfully, and went on making herself comfortable.

"On screen, Lieutenant," Picard commanded as he entered the bridge, crossing rapidly to stand between ops and con.

The viewscreen settled into the features of an adult Injaabii male who glared with narrowed eyes and out-thrust jaw at the Captain.

"Do I have the honour of addressing the Surajh Heratt?" Picard asked delicately. It would do no good to antagonise this man, and treading carefully seemed to be a good idea.

The male continued to regard the bridge with evident curiosity, and ignored Picard's greeting. This gave the Captain an opportunity to study his future host carefully. What he saw did not fill him with any great feeling of ease.

Cold eyes, golden-tawny, set in a face of confident arrogance. Hair that matched the colour of his eyes sweeping back from a high forehead, unfettered by any ornamentation; those eyes narrowed again as the Captain returned the insolent stare measure for measure. Behind him, the outrage from his senior officers could be felt as an almost physical blow, and a low growl issued from low in Worf's chest.

"Well met, Captain," a resonant baritone boomed onto the bridge, and the Injaabii relaxed from his high-handed pose, removing fists from hips. "I am he. What do you wish?"

Picard thought, *Two can play at that game, my friend*, and remained silent, waiting to see a reaction from the Surajh.

A thin smile played on Heratt's lips as he recognized the tactic as his own replayed, and that thin mouth parted in a smile which bared the Injaabii sharp canines and bluish gums - a hearty laugh came from his throat and he threw his magnificent leonine head back in appreciation.

Running a massive four-fingered hand across his chin, Heratt said, "What can I do for you, W'Chri Picard?"

W'Chri? Picard made a mental note to ask cha' Lakri the significance of that title, while saying aloud, "I would ask a boon of you, Surajh."

"Speak," the big male ordered, and regained his imposing stance; legs akimbo, thick arms folded across an equally imposing chest.

The Captain was grateful he could take his officers with him to this feast, but allowed none of this to show on his face as he uttered what Lelltorin had advised him to say. "I ask that I bring my wives to the feast, and that you will allow them safe passage to your seraglio."

The teeth flashed again in a threatening display of amusement, and the Surajh dipped his head in acknowledgement of the honour. "Deserving indeed of the title, W'Chri." The gold eyes flicked to Worf standing at the tactical console. "You will bring your brothers with you also?" And when Picard nodded briskly, added, "Then bring your wives, and we will... see what mettle you Federation people have."

Heratt gestured briefly, and flowed into the salute of an equal to an equal. Picard bowed his head, and, swinging slightly to Worf, drew his thumb across his throat. The communication ceased.

"Is that wise, Captain?" demanded the First Officer, who had managed to hold his peace throughout the interesting little confrontation.

"Number One," said Picard, "I have no idea whether it is wise or not, but the Ambassador assures me it will be an indication of great trust on my part. I believe her, even if I do not - " the Captain gestured to the viewscreen which now held the pearly splendour of Injaab in velvet darkness - "trust the Surajh any further than I can throw him."

"Captain," a deep voice inquired, "are we to be present at this banquet?" There was a trace of eagerness in the Klingon's face when Picard turned to look at his Security Chief. Worf quickly suppressed it.

"Yes," Picard said flatly. Riker and Worf exchanged satisfied glances, and waited for their Captain to speak again. "I'll leave Data in command for the few hours we will be there." The Captain moved towards the turbolift doors. "And, gentlemen, you will abide at all times by the behaviour expected of an officer and a gentleman - even if under severe provocation. Do I make myself quite clear?"

The two chorused. "Aye, sir."

Picard was sure they meant it at the moment, but could not help wondering what tomorrow would bring.

Walking through the door of his quarters, Picard noticed the tray he and Felicity had

been eating and drinking from had been neatly tidied away. His room was empty of company, and he found he had been looking forward to renewing their acquaintance on a deeper level. *It is sometimes very lonely being a Starship Captain*, he reflected ruefully.

Undressing, Picard headed to the sonic shower hoping he would be able to release some of the tension which was steadily mounting into a headache of outstanding proportions. He picked up a dressing gown, then stopped as he heard a noise coming from his bedroom.

Tightening the belt of his robe around his waist, the Captain stood still and listened carefully - the bedroom was in darkness, so he could gather no clue from that.

Cautiously, Picard went into the other room and stared into the blackness waiting for his eyes to adjust to the fall of shadows. His foot became tangled in something soft lying on the floor, and he became suspicious. "Fliss?" he said, and the tone of his voice was that used to instill immediate obedience into the most recalcitrant of his crew.

Lelltorin was made of much sterner stuff, though.

A chuckle came from the recesses of his bed, and she lifted herself onto one elbow, lying on her side. "Well, well, Captain. What a very pleasant surprise to see you here." She echoed her earlier words, and Picard could just make out her silver hair as a soft curtain behind her on his pillow. Her face was wraithlike; an enchantress, Circe, gently beautiful in this half-light as she never could be in daylight - but then he recalled she had ever been a creature more suited to the night.

Lelltorin raised herself, and the bedclothes fell to pool decorously around gently swelling hips. "I thought you might need a little relaxation, Jean-Luc," she whispered in velvet tones, and languorously lifted an arm out to him.

Almost mesmerised, Picard crossed to the bed and sat on it. Taking her hand, he said, "I don't know if this is such a good idea, Fliss." He kissed the hand, and, dropping it, moved his own to her satin smooth shoulders caressing them gently and then onto the slender column of her neck. Placing his thumbs in her jaw, Picard tilted her face upwards.

Lelltorin smiled with parted lips, putting her arms around his back to trace her fingertips down his spine leaving a blaze of fire, then gently bit his mouth. "Maybe," she murmured, her breath hot against his skin. "Maybe not."

Picard watched her face; the dark eyes glimmering with desire, serving to add fuel to the already tight knot in his stomach of reciprocal passion. And he, throwing caution to the wind, bent his mouth to hers, revelling in the sweet warmth of a woman sure of her own desirability.

"Maybe not," he agreed.

They stood in the transporter room waiting for Ambassador Lelltorin to make her appearance. All were arrayed in dress uniform, save for the women who wore Injaabii robes and masks.

Worf stuck a forefinger in the collar of his tunic, and ran it round in an effort to ease the constriction around his neck. He did not like the elaborate preparations they had been forced to make - the only thing he truly approved of was the jilah, and though he wore it with elan, it did not improve his mood even remotely. *I could hope to see it used*, he thought peevishly.

Picard paced about the room with impatience, and his personnel looked on with stoic disregard as if this was a side they were accustomed to seeing in their Captain. He raised his head only when the doors swooshed open to allow Lelltorin and her challai to enter. "Ambassador," he acknowledged her briskly.

She inclined her head. "Captain," she replied and moved majestically to the platform.

As she, Troi and Crusher gathered on the pad they tinkled with the sound of bells attached to wrists and ankles from bangles of thinly wrought silver. The noise jangled Picard's nerves, and he thanked all the gods in the heavens he would only be dealing with the males - at least, for the moment.

Lelltorin turned to face them. "Remember, you must walk behind us. The challai will lead the way into the Surajh's courtyard." She then nodded once at Lakri and Dallra, and they joined their mistress on the transporter pad.

To Geordi La Forge, Worf whispered in an aside. "I do not see why we have to make such a farcical entrance." He had lost all patience with the entire affair, the final straw being the dress uniform.

La Forge shrugged. "I dunno, Worf. There's gotta be a reason for it, I guess. Now me - " and the Chief Engineer gingerly placed his hand around the pommel of his blade - "I feel nervous carrying one of these bloody things. S'pose somebody wants to pick a fight - I never could use one worth a damn."

The Klingon watched the Ambassador and her aides dissolve in the bright beam of the transporter, and as he took his place on the pad regarded his friend. "If they do, then I will stop them."

For some reason, La Forge did not find that inspiring him with any great confidence, and resolved to point it out to Worf as soon as he could.

He did not have the chance as they materialised in open country, and even the big Klingon was moved to admiration for the beauty of their surroundings.

Overhead, in a flawless cerulean sky, skimmed brightly coloured denizens of the air. They filled the atmosphere with their sweetly piercing cries; alien, yet alluring; strange, yet familiar.

Picard took a deep breath to take in the scent of a thousand unidentifiable things, and his eyes took in the gently sloping landscape which faded to purple and mauve in the haze of the troposphere. In the distance, gleaming like fairy spires, could be seen a city - a thing of make-believe; sugar spun, frosted, gilded and quite stunning.

The bronze foliage of the trees which lined the road they stood on stirred in a gentle breeze, and from amongst those leaves peered the bright dark eyes of something small and furry that in a rapid flurry of movement darted out of sight.

The challai set off purposefully, heading at a rapid pace towards an attractive building made from a local white sandstone. As they drew nearer, Picard could see great gates swing slowly open revealing the courtyard to the home of Surajh Heratt.

Around the perimeter of the decorative wall stood the household of the Surajh - challai and wives, and for the first time, Picard espied children among the adults. He marvelled at the

younglings; they were elven in their beauty - slight and quick as mercury. Their abundant, glossy hair shone in the sunlight in a myriad different shades - golden, black, red, tawny, and here and there, silver. The adults stood silent and diffident at the approach of the strangers.

As Dallra and Lakri came to a halt in front of the entrance, a woman detached herself and approached the challai stiffly. She made several gestures imperiously to them, and they bowed so low they scraped the ground with their hair. Turning her back the woman walked back into the dim coolness of the quadrangle, the other females falling into line behind her, and all the males - of whom there were more than Picard expected - melted into the background and dropped their heads as she passed.

Lelltorin, Troi and Crusher, led by cha' Dallra, followed her into the building. After them went the female children of the Surajh's household, and then his challai offspring.

As the last one disappeared, Heratt made himself visible at last. The Surajh drew up in front of Picard, and stared down at the smaller man.

Picard returned his regard unflinchingly, and made no comment. *You really are an insolent sonofabitch*, passed through his mind fleetingly. *This is not going to make our job any easier.*

Recognising a non-verbal threat - and feeling the slight as his Captain might not - Worf came to stand just behind Picard's shoulder, and forced the Surajh to notice him. The Klingon smiled, making sure he showed the points of all his teeth, and knew the Injaabii would see it for what it was.

Heratt smiled himself, baring his fangs, to let the Security Officer know he had received the message loud and clear. "Come," he said, and headed for the house.

Riker joined Worf and exchanged a swift look with him. "This don't seem too promising, my friend," he muttered, and was rewarded by a darkling spark in the Klingon's eyes.

"No," agreed Worf, glowering in the direction of the Injaabii. "I do not trust him."

"Nor I," said La Forge.

Warmed by their mutual distrust of the Surajh, the three officers followed their Captain and their host into the quad, and the Security personnel who had come along to help bulk the Captain's 'clan' went with them.

The gates shut with a thud, and Worf spun on his heel to face the noise. Chastising himself for over-reaction, he rejoined his comrades, and gazed about himself with interest. The Klingon touched the weapon at his hip briefly - just to reassure himself it was still available, of course - disappointed there was no reason for its use just now.

The yard was neatly swept and clean. The paving lay in intricate patterns, and the clinical barrenness of it was broken by the splash of lurid colour against the white. Flowers bloomed abundantly, each pot artfully positioned to draw the eye in such a way as to lend a pleasing aspect to the area.

This was not to be their destination, however, as Heratt did not stop there; he moved swiftly onwards into what they had taken to be the house proper, but which proved to be yet another quadrangle. In this, a fountain played cool water high into the air; the water fell into a pond in the shape of a pentangle. Exquisite lilies bobbed on the water's surface, each one white but delicately suffused with bronze and gold. At the centre of the flower head there was

a profusion of stamens poking out in stiff, bristly attention. Their perfume filled the courtyard, and the Captain and the seven accompanying him could not help but delight in the symmetry and simplicity of the Surajh's home.

They were led from the inner courtyard into a spacious room around which were placed low tables. About these were set reclining benches with satin cushions to rest elbows on, and behind hung swathes of heavy brocades, rich silks and lustrous deep velvets.

Picard stopped, and waited. The others came to a halt behind him.

Heratt raised his arm and swept it in a wide arc around the room. "Cha' Lakri, bid my guests well come." The Surajh smiled again, this time making an effort to conceal his prominent eyeteeth with his thin lips. Putting hands on hips, he stood with his feet apart looking down his aquiline nose at the Captain and his staff.

Lakri eyed the Surajh thoughtfully. Carefully, in rehearsed steps, the challai moved to a table set with a tall flagon made from crystal and silver, and picking it up poured some of the contents into two goblets. Raising both glasses, he stepped towards Picard and Heratt, offering them the wine.

Following the custom Lakri had told him of, Picard said, "My clan brothers and I thank you for your gracious hospitality. May good fortune and health ever belong to your household." As the last words left his mouth, the Captain raised the goblet to Heratt and bowed over it. Then he took a small sip, and passed it on to the others. Each of them took a mouthful of the heady substance, and returned it to the Captain, who handed it back to Lakri with a low bow. Picard then bowed to Heratt. "Brother."

For some reason, the word stuck in Picard's craw, and he could see from the Surajh's expression that he knew it and would not hesitate to make good use of that knowledge. *When the time is right*, flitted through Picard's mind.

He heard the word repeated back at him in slow, drawling tones. "Brother." Narrowing his eyes in speculation, Picard gazed deeply into golden-tawny orbs. The nictitating membrane flashed over them, effectively concealing the contents of the mind behind them. A mind which, the Captain suspected, worked like a steel trap.

Heratt, still smiling, looked over the rest of his guests to finally come to rest, speculatively, on Worf. "You are a Klingon?" As he spoke, the Surajh unconsciously fingered the jilah at his side, running an expert digit along the edge. A small bead of blood appeared, and, just as absently, he brought it to his mouth to lap away.

Worf had not missed the movement - nor had any of the others - and they all stiffened as they waited for the Klingon to respond. "Yes," was all he felt he could say.

"Yes?" The Surajh reared his head back, and strode to examine the Security Chief from a closer angle. Putting out a clawed hand he felt the biceps in Worf's upper arm, then bared his fangs. "Hah! W'Chri Picard," Heratt hissed with Injaabii laughter. "You would not consider giving this one to me? No? I thought not. A shame, he would make a challai of some remarkability - one to be the envy of other households." The Injaabii placed a closed fist on the Klingon's massive chest. "One to rival the old days, eh?"

Worf glowered furiously, and clenched his jaw and fists in an effort to restrain the impulse he was getting to smash the Surajh in the middle of his smug face. He took a few deep breaths, and with exaggerated politeness, said, "Sir, I realize the honour you bestow on me. It

is with infinite regret I must decline."

"Brother," said Heratt, addressing Picard, but never allowing his eyes to leave the face of the Klingon, "do you concur with this one's sentiments?" Then his gaze fastened itself with a kind of greedy, hot intensity on Riker, and he looked a question at the Captain. "Or perhaps?..."

Picard regarded Heratt dispassionately, his face revealing by not so much as a muscular twitch the cold rage which was starting to burn. Taking the measure of the man, Picard replied shortly, "I do." Then he jerked his head at Worf, who took himself out of the reach of the Surajh and stood beside the other personnel. "They are of value to me *as* they are. Although I remain aware of the great compliment you have paid us." Then Picard inclined his head fractionally to the other male, and smiled his own tight lipped smile.

The hissing laughter continued, and Heratt raised his well-muscled arm to point at the seating. "Then we shall take our ease, brothers - " he sent a piercing look around the room to the males of his clan - "whilst we await my other... guests."

Troi was considerably startled by the beauty of the interior of the seraglio. If it was a cage, then it was gilded in the very best of taste, and from here it seemed the birds had no wish to fly.

"Sit," said the woman they had followed, and she settled herself onto the carpeted floor.

Following her example, Lelltorin reclined easily among the cushions which lay scattered about, and took the refreshment offered to her by an unknown challai. "Beverly, Deanna, please do as requested." This was said softly, and through a pleasant smile.

Crusher and Troi moved to obey, and seated themselves close to the Ambassador. They both took the opportunity to survey their surroundings more closely.

From where they were seated Troi surmised the whole of the upper floor must be occupied by the women of the Surajh's household. And that the household was very large indeed - much larger than she had at first thought. If, as she and Beverly had been led to understand, a male's worth was measured by the number of females in his harem, then Heratt must hold a position of some importance. Or did he? And... there was such sorrow here it was painful for her to dwell too closely on it - the emotional content was stifling. Troi wanted more about the Injaabii customs and tried to ask the Ambassador for some information. She was courteously rebuffed, and Deanna shared a quick glance with Crusher who shook her head in a rapid negative.

Gentle music started to play, mellow and achingly lovely. The musicians were all, as far as Troi could see, challai, and elsewhere they scurried about to tend to the wives of Heratt with smooth efficiency. She bent close to Crusher. "Beverly," she whispered, "there are so many of them."

Crusher nodded, the chains jingling prettily. "Many more than I'd imagined." She tucked her legs under her in an attempt to become comfortable, and fidgeted a little more when she could not seem to find a easier position. "Damn," she said, and with a quick flick of her head indicated to Troi to watch the Ambassador.

Ambassador Lelltorin finally returned her attention to her companions. She smiled at

them and leaning closer spoke at last. "You may take off the masks when Chevria removes hers." And under her breath so only they would catch her words, "Remember, protocol is everything here. Everything!"

Startled by the vehemence of her words, Crusher and Troi both twitched their brows, hidden by the veils, unobserved.

Chevria, the female they had followed, slipped the domino off, and ran her hand into her coiffure, easing the curls on her broad forehead to lie straight. They were a deep burnished gold, and she raised her head so that Crusher and Troi got their first close look at an Injaabii female. With skin to match hair and eyes of dark green, Chevria was beautiful in the manner of all Injaabii - almost feline, but Human in features except for higher, wider foreheads and pointed chins. Her ears were also pointed, and in each sparkled a series of different gem stones. Chevria smiled in the manner of her people, keeping her fangs covered.

As if on cue, the other wives also became barefaced and waited for the two Humans and the Betazoid to reveal themselves for further scrutiny.

"Please," said Chevria, "be at your ease." Clapping her hands, she beckoned with her fingers, and a challai rushed to obey. "We have seen so few of your species, that I am certain you will forgive us our curiosity." She paused to watch the three alien women. "Ah, thank you, cha'."

Chevria received the small item and presented it to Lelltorin gracefully. Ignoring the gasp of pleasure, Chevria continued, "Please, it is nothing - nothing. Just a tapos." She sat waiting expectantly.

The Ambassador handled the tapos with care, caressing the smooth surface of the carving with reverential fingers. As it warmed to her body, the surface began to glow, began to change shades; from pearly white to blush pink, and, where Lelltorin's hands lingered, golden.

Lelltorin opened the palms of her hands to show to her companions.

"It's lovely," breathed Troi, and Crusher could only agree mutely.

"Cha'," said Lelltorin, and Dallra arrived sedately at his mistress's side, "inform the lady Chevria we are conscious of the great favour she does us, and that we too bring her a gift beyond price."

Crusher gave Troi a 'What the hell is she talking about?' look, and received an equally perplexed expression in return.

"Speak without the intervention of cha', Felicity," instructed Chevria with a dismissive wave of her wrist, and Dallra bent into the obeisance he used in the presence of females. He stepped back, remaining silent as a good servant should.

The Ambassador continued without pause, " - and she is Beverly Crusher - a physician of great skill. If you would allow her to examine your sister wives, she may be able to discover the reason for their illness."

Crusher found the disconcerting gaze of Chevria on her. The woman's eyes cut through her to her soul, and seemed to find it wanting. She bowed her head before that unrelenting stare.

"Indeed?" was all Chevria said.

"Indeed," affirmed Lelltorin. "Beverly is highly regarded by Picard."

The woman hissed with laughter. "A male!" she said disdainfully. "What can he know?" Other women joined her in her amusement.

"Human males are different from your own," replied Lelltorin. "Chevria, I have told you of this before. She *will* be able to help - if you'll let her."

Chevria glanced sidelong at her with long green eyes, and bared her teeth. "You wish to speak with my birth sister, and would do what you can for the control of Tretharian." She licked her fangs with a reddish tongue, and fastened those green eyes on Lelltorin like a snake.

Cha' Dallra went stiff and held his head straight so he could not be accused of taking liberties. But Crusher and Troi both noticed the surreptitious step he had taken to be closer to the Ambassador.

"It is true that I wish to speak with N'Chal Tharini - but it is not for that I visit you, sister." Lelltorin spoke slowly and clearly. "Is it not true we are friends above all else, and that I would do whatever I could to help you and your sister wives? The Tretharian is *not* the issue at stake here, Chevria. Your children are."

Chevria remained silent, putting a long finger to her mouth. She chewed on a knuckle as she sat, her eyes dark with some unknown emotion. Beside Lelltorin, Troi shivered slightly as she caught a glimpse of those alien feelings - so strange - that bound these people together.

Eyes clearing, Chevria drew a deep breath to release it in a very Human sigh. She turned to Crusher. "Doctor, if you can help us we will sing songs of you for generations - but I don't know if you can." Rising to her elegant feet, Chevria held out her hand to Beverly, who looked at it blankly for a moment. "Come," she said, and her tone brooked no argument.

Crusher reached out her own hand and found it grasped strongly by the alien woman. Chevria steered her to some curtains, which were pulled aside to reveal a door.

Making certain Lelltorin and Troi were with them, Chevria opened the door to a cubicle at the end of which was another door. As they passed through this, Chevria murmured, "Here we hide our shame and our sorrow."

The Doctor detached herself from Chevria by shaking her hand loose. Staring about herself with wide eyes, she took her medical scanner and tricorder out to take some initial readings. Moving along the room, she paused to crouch by the side of a black-haired female with vacant eyes and spittle hanging from a slack lower lip.

Expertly, Crusher ran her instruments over her, and checked her findings. A frown creasing her brow, Crusher went on to the next woman who was restrained by a slight force field, and ran the instruments over her. Bemused, Beverly straightened. "I don't know," she said, "without going back to the Enterprise and running a few tests... I'll need to take them with me."

"It is imperative you take them to the Enterprise?" Chevria asked. She bent over the restrained woman, and reaching out a hand gently stroked the pale face in front of her. There was no recognition in the wild black eyes opened so wide they revealed the whites in a pallid rim against bronze skin.

Crusher merely nodded, and folded her arms under her breasts as she waited for Chevria to speak again.

"How many of my sisters will you need to take?" Chevria finally looked at Crusher, her decision made after she had mulled it over for a few moments.

The Doctor shrugged. "A half dozen, maybe. But I'll need a good cross section of those affected. From those in the earliest stages to those who are -"

"About to die?" said Chevria. "Then I must be among those to go with you, Beverly. I must go to your Enterprise, for I am in the first stage." The Injaabii bowed her golden head. "For the last five seasons I have not quickened, and Heratt -" Chevria's face grew cold and still with anger - "would replace me." She hissed with self-mocking laughter, a bitter hollow sound. "Replace *me* - who have given him five daughters. Five!" she said proudly, and flicked her hands in the air in a gesture Troi and Crusher did not recognize.

Troi placed a hand on Chevria's forearm. "Surely he would not seek to replace you for so trifling a reason?"

"Troi," said Chevria, "has not Felicity instructed you in our mores? He will try to replace me with a woman who has her fertility - even though my challai siblings will endeavour to negotiate a settlement before involving the N'Chal, my birth sister." Eyes glittering, she continued, "But mine is the challenge right - and if all other avenues are closed to me - then this *will* be the road I choose." Smiling, Chevria nodded. "Yes, mine shall be the lifeblood of Heratt."

Turning her attention to Crusher, the Injaabii stroked her throat and ran a painted hand down to her chest. "So, heal me and my sisters. For if I too become a poor mad thing, then I cannot pursue my revenge - for myself, or for them."

"Do you hate Heratt so much then, sister?" asked Lelltorin, barely able to keep the shock from her voice. "Is he worth this?"

"No," Chevria stated baldly. "But they are." She held out her hand palm uppermost and indicated the room as a whole - filled with women of every age, and all fatally ill.

Crusher ran her forearm across her forehead, and sighed. "Agreed, Chevria. Fliss, when can we go back to the Enterprise?"

Lelltorin tilted her head on one side. "Whenever you want to, Beverly. You do not have to wait for the permission of your 'husband'. No woman would."

"But I must let Jean-Luc know, Fliss."

"Cha' will do that service for you." Lelltorin retraced her steps to the inner door, going into the cubicle and then back to the seraglio. "Cha'!" she commanded, and Dallra appeared miraculously at her side. "Inform the Captain we have departed for the Enterprise, along with a number of the wives of Heratt."

Dallra obeyed with alacrity, baring his eyeteeth in appreciation of the coup they would be striking. "Madam."

Troi watched his retreating figure with interest. "Have I missed something, Felicity?"

Does this have more significance than I first construed?" She turned her dark eyes on the Ambassador, and went on, "I know I felt something from Dallra, but I couldn't quite grasp it."

Lelltorin nodded. "Yes, Deanna, you felt something. It is unlikely you'll have come across this particular emotion. It's peculiarly Injaabii - a kind of mixture between glee, pride and loyalty." The Ambassador smiled with obvious and devious delight. "We can trust cha' to use the news to our best advantage."

Chevria, who had been silent as the arrangements were being made, spoke up, "And is it true that in your society all females go unmasked before the gaze of males, Beverly Crusher physician?" There was a carefully hidden feeling of disbelief in the woman's voice.

"Yes, it's true," said Crusher not unsympathetically. "If you find that a difficult concept to deal with then I'm sure we'll be able to make some arrangements to ensure your comfort."

Lelltorin took Crusher's arm and pulled her some distance from the small group of Injaabii females so they would not be overheard. "It's not just that, Beverly." She gestured in a small way. "These people will never have been in a space vehicle - it's only the challai who have been in space. Males and females are all planetbound by the hierarchical nature of the society they live in."

Crusher and Troi looked amazed, and Troi said, "But - but how did they contact the Federation with such a narrow sense of life beyond their world?"

The Ambassador grimaced. "The whole thing is why the Injaabii have been held hostage by the Ferengi with such ease. Not to put too fine a point on it, our friends the Injaabii were ripe for the plucking. So, you see, to have Chevria aboard the Enterprise is a bargaining point for us in the internal politics of this world. She is, after all, the N'Chal's birth sister, and as such has the ear of the most important political figure on Injaab."

"It's like kidnapping," Troi protested weakly.

"I agree," said Lelltorin. "But Chevria is a willing detainee. If Beverly can find a cure for the disease, then it will be to the advantage of us all." She gazed at them, and continued after a slight pause. "And if not - well, then she is still useful to us."

Crusher was shocked to the core. "That's so ruthless, Fliss. I can't believe someone would be so ready to sacrifice themselves in this manner."

"Beverly, believe what you like. But this *is* true. Chevria knows what she is doing - " her dark eyes gazed steadily at them, holding them in thrall - "and so do I. So please go along with me."

Reluctantly, Crusher thought through the proposal before them. She did not much like what she had heard - she didn't have to, she supposed - but she was a Doctor first, and her task had to be the finding of a reason for this mysterious disease. And if she could, God willing, a cure. The politicians would take care of the politics. "Okay, let's get them to the Enterprise so I can start work."

Lelltorin nodded her head in approval. "Excellent. Chevria," she called, "we're ready. Select those of your sisters you wish to accompany you, and we will go."

The Injaabii inclined her head. "It shall be so, Felicity Lelltorin. As part-payment of this debt I shall owe you, cha' Dallra will have discourse with Tharini. Of that you may rest

assured."

Cha' Dallra entered the domain of the males not without some trepidation. The news he carried for Heratt would not be to the Surajh's taste at all, and in his immediate anger he might decide that cha' would be better without his head. Also he was unable to rely upon the alien Picard as a protector. He would have to choose his moment most carefully.

The Injaabii stepped through the festoons into the banqueting area where all the males lolled in an abandoned display of decadence. Most appeared very drunk, but cha' knew that that could merely be a show for the benefit of Heratt's 'guests'. Not for the first time in his eventful life, Dallra found himself grateful his sire had selected him and not his birth brother to be challai. To be at the beck and call of hormones! A disgusting notion. He preferred his own lucidity.

Heratt noticed him first, and rising from his reclined position, gestured impatiently. "Cha'?" he hissed in ill-concealed surprise. "What reason does Lelltirin give for you to join us?"

Dallra bent his head to the Surajh, making certain his eyes could not be seen. "It was her wish. She is my mistress, and I ask no questions of her." *At least it is no open lie, he thought with small satisfaction, and contains enough of the truth to satisfy even that eater of carrion.* None of this showed on Dallra's face, or in his voice. He backed carefully to join Picard and his small band of officers, expecting Heratt to see through the untruth at any moment and him to lose an appendage he was very attached to.

When he was close enough not to rouse any suspicion by his actions, he smiled thinly at Picard and indicated the Captain should come nearer.

"Sir Captain, Lelltirin and Heratt's first wife are aboard your Starship with others of the sisterhood." As the Captain started to ask some searching questions, Dallra placed his closed fist on the alien's chest. "No, W'Chri Picard, this can be used to our advantage. He - " Dallra flicked his black eyes in the direction of Heratt - "is up to some trickery."

Picard regarded his host surreptitiously, and pursed his lips. "I agree. However, cha', we have not seen any evidence of trouble. Do you have an idea what game our - " the Captain's voice dropped with disgust - "brother is about?"

Regretfully, Dallra made a small negative signal, and indicated Picard should rejoin his officers.

Reseating himself, Picard took the opportunity to examine each of the males in the clan of Heratt. They were outnumbered if it came to a fight but, ever the optimist, he hoped it would not come to that. The atmosphere, though, was so tense it was possible Heratt could take offence at nothing. *Like walking on eggshells, Picard thought, but with a blindfold, and on my hands.*

The tenseness of the situation was translating to distinct uneasiness in Riker, and Worf, who sat beside him, was fingering the jiloh at his side with too obvious an expression of fierce anticipation. La Forge was picking at the meal laid out in front of him with little appetite, pushing it aimlessly around his plate with one of the eating knives they had been supplied.

Riker picked up a chilled goblet which contained a sherbety, lemony concoction, and

drank slowly, even cautiously. The stuff seemed innocuous, even smelled like confectionery, but it also had a kick like the proverbial mule.

He had not missed the entrance of Dallra, and was bursting with curiosity to find out the significance of that entrance - and the little talk. Time to shed some light on a dark situation - at least he hoped it would.

The big silver-haired male to his left hefted the heavily jewelled dagger in capable hands, using it to spear a piece of fruit and rare meat. "Eat," he rumbled, and shoved it forcefully into the First Officer's face. "It is very good. A bite of wevelt and follow it by roast churu. Yes?" So saying he pounded Riker on the back in a familiar manner, baring his eyeteeth in an overtly threatening display.

The big Human smiled tightly in his beard, and received the wevelt and churu brusquely. Riker scrutinised the flesh on the shaft of the knife. It was still quite pink, and some juices - both fruit and meat - ran to spatter the table. Trying to appear grateful for the supplement to his plate, the First Officer said, but barely civil, "My thanks, Thiver."

"What bothers you, Human?" asked Thiver. Pale grey eyes regarded Riker with glee, the pupils narrow slits. "We like it a little rare - it puts body in you. Hah! Eh?"

Under his breath, the Commander muttered incredulously, "A *little* rare? A stay in intensive care would probably have it on its feet!" Aloud, Riker nodded his agreement. "Yes, I dare say it does put body into you." He took a mouthful of the food, and stopped chewing as it impacted his taste buds. Fighting hard not to spit the fare in a great arc across the room (he felt it would not be looked on too kindly by either the Surajh or the Captain) Riker turned his face to Worf. He swallowed, and reached for the sherbet. Thiver slapped his hand down.

"No, no, Human. Drink it down with this." He produced a flagon of liquid, and throwing the sherbet across the room, slopped some of the amber fluid into the hastily emptied goblet.

Worf extended his own goblet. "I will have some of that."

"Ah, no, Klingon. For you we have something more... palatable, shall we say?"

Worf exchanged a glance with his commanding officer, and he growled with just the right amount of menace. "I *insist* - " breaking off to glare at Thiver.

Thiver responded to the unspoken threat by loosening the jilah in its sheath, and rising, bounced lightly on narrow, naked feet. "Insist!?" He hissed with laughter. "Please continue to insist. The jilah will relish your blood, Klingon."

Riker stood too, and placed himself between Worf and Thiver; they were both, by now, toe to toe and eyeball to eyeball. The difference of opinion was attracting a great deal of attention. *Of the wrong sort*, Riker reflected with exasperation.

Quietly, the First Officer began to speak in even and reasonable tones. "Worf, I suggest you take your seat." The big Klingon looked mutinous, and clenched his jaw, but obeyed. He stepped backwards to his couch, though he remained standing. "Thiver - " Riker raised his hands in an open gesture, hoping to placate the Injaabii - "we are here as guests of your honoured brother, Surajh Heratt. We have no wish to quarrel. My Captain sits at his table as friend. Would you dishonour Heratt?"

Thiver eyed the Human. From the corner of his eyes, he could see the rest of the players in the farce starting to gather. They included those two ill-begotten challai serving the Human Ambassador, Lelltorin. The sound of swords being freed swept around the room, and thrilled his warrior's soul.

La Forge, Worf and the four Security men collected at Riker's shoulder. All were heartily bored with the whole affair. Even Geordi was itching for a fight.

From the background, Picard made an attempt to get to his staff, but found his way barred by the challai. "W'Chri Picard," Lakri appealed. "Please do not interfere. You would be seen to support, and then we would not be able to salvage this."

Angrily, Picard turned on him. "Really?" his voice dripped sarcasm. "You will grant me pardon if I say the situation looks fairly unsalvageable from here."

"The information regarding Chevria is of importance. Heratt will not be able to move against you whilst she remains aboard the Enterprise." Dallra put clawed fingers lightly on Picard's forearm. "Do you see? She is hostage for you, as are her sister wives."

Picard *saw* with perfect clarity, and thinned his mouth. "Infamous," he muttered in abhorrence. "So, cha', I merely wait for the right moment to 'drop' this information."

"Indeed, W'Chri Picard, and you will not be able to gain as much now as you could if you were to wait a little longer." Lakri's voice urged patience.

Counselled thus against his better judgement, Picard had to bow to the two challai in their greater knowledge of their people's customs. He wished he had the benefit of Troi's empathic powers; her input at this particular juncture would have been particularly useful.

Riker was surprised to see Thiver back down. The silver and grey male, at a barely seen gesture from Heratt, swept his hand across his naked chest, and dropped his light eyes to the ground. "My pardon," he said. The glow of bellicosity did not fade from his features, it was merely hidden behind the third eyelid.

"What happened?" La Forge asked in a low whisper.

"I am not certain," Worf said, and did not take his own eyes off the other male.

From the corner of his mouth, Riker said, "Something is about to take off, my friends, and it ain't got wings." He turned his head in the direction the Surajh was looking.

Six shimmering shapes coalesced on the great central rug of the room, becoming recognizable as Ferengi. Their leader stepped forward, and tilted his misshapen head on one side taking in the complement before him. The Ferengi's mouth opened in a leer, showing sharp edged teeth, and he turned slowly in a semi-circle to examine the Enterprise people.

Obsequiously, he said, "Well, Surajh Heratt - " and he was interrupted by the beeping of a Federation communicator.

Everybody regarded Picard.

"Yes!" the Captain snapped.

"Sir," began Data, "a Ferengi vessel has just come within our sensor range. We have

hailed them in an effort to establish communications, but they are ignoring our overtures. It appears they have also beamed six individuals to the planet's surface, and - "

"Thank you, Mr. Data, for the information. A little late, perhaps," Picard's voice sounded forced, "but welcome, never-the-less, for all that."

There was a silence as the android officer absorbed the import of the Captain's words. "Ah," he said.

"Ah, indeed, Data. Picard out." And the Captain returned his attention to the new cards dealt him in a hand which was appearing ever more shaky.

The Ferengi continued as though he had never been cut off in mid-sentence, his oily accents stridently filling the room. "Brother." The single word induced in the Enterprise personnel a distinct feeling of nausea, and the sensation grew stronger as the Ferengi continued. "Brother, it is with great pleasure that I am once more in your presence. I bring a further supply of the perfume you asked for. An exotic unguent for the females of your harem - one which will increase your vigour and potency."

Heratt stalked forward to the Ferengi, his great head thrust forward aggressively. "And will -" he asked in murderous accents - "the First of my house bear me a litter in the next season, oh ugly ones?" When the Surajh reached the place where the Ferengi stood, he straightened and put his clawed fingers in the middle of the other's chest. "Wellll?!" he drawled dangerously.

"But of course," the Ferengi assured him. He smiled in an ingratiating manner, and, gesturing to one of his officers, received a box. He removed the Surajh's fist daintily from its resting place, and allowed the hand to fall.

"Is this it?" Heratt was scornful, and took it from him. "Well, Daimon Toreq, this had better work. She who is First will have your head if it does not." The Surajh hissed with laughter again. "I would enjoy that."

Toreq regarded him craftily, and ran a forefinger in his ear. He took the finger out and inspected it minutely, then turned his attention to the Federation Captain and his staff. "I think you will be surprised by the way in which it works, *brother*. Tell me, Human, for what reason are you here?"

Picard regarded the Daimon with patent distrust (always a good starting point with Ferengi) wondering how much he could get away without saying. To him, it seemed the Ferengi was asking only for some ulterior motive of his own - a motive not yet completely revealed. The Captain came to the conclusion prevarication was possibly in order. "I am invited to dine with a brother," he said with a slight bow in the direction of the Surajh, "and my officers and myself are enjoying his kind and generous hospitality."

Cha' Dallra decided to take a hand in the proceedings. Touching the Captain on his arm, he nodded and caught Picard's eyes in an unblinking and direct stare.

Taking the broad hint, Picard said, "However, it is with deep regret that we are no longer able to stay at his table. Our duties aboard the Enterprise call us." He paused, uncertain how to break the news that Heratt's First was aboard his ship. Lakri, seeing his hesitation, moved forward and salaamed.

He spoke in low tones. "Your First, Chevria, has accepted the welcome of the Enterprise.

Also with her went W'Chri Picard's sister wives, and six others of your household."

Heratt paced forward to stand directly in front of Picard. The thick mane of hair tumbled over his forehead as he bent down to the Captain, his tawny eyes filled with cold rage. "You knew of this!" he accused in low tones, then hissed with vicious laughter. "You think to outmatch me, Human?"

Picard returned that cruel gaze without blinking, and said with a calm he was far from feeling, "If you believe I have tricked you - "

"Tricked me!?" The head went back, and Heratt howled in rage all his teeth bared, and it snapped forward again. The Surajh reached his great hands towards Picard's throat. "I will have your blood, Human," he spat.

Worf and his men automatically moved to try to counteract any threat the Surajh might try to make, but were stopped when Lakri stepped into Heratt's field of vision, and, with an apologetic glance at the Captain, pushed him firmly out of reach. "Wiche ne!" he barked in commanding tones.

Heratt drew himself back to order although the fury still burned in him. "Cha'," he acknowledged. Turning to Picard, he gave a curt nod of his head. "For now, W'Chri Picard, the game is yours. I withdraw from the field."

Without further preamble, the Injaabii male joined his clan brothers. He rattled the jilah in its sheath menacingly, and spoke, "If the First meets death at your hands, the blade will be bared to the Federation - " he snarled contemptuously at the small group of aliens - "and it will not be satisfied with less than death."

Dallra and Lakri came together and bowed to the Surajh. "So be it," they intoned together.

Picard tapped his communicator - time to beat a strategic retreat - and snapped, "Mr O'Brien, get us the hell out of here."

Through all this, the Ferengi remained interested and thoughtful spectators. Here was something that could be turned to their advantage with a little thought. Toreq was well pleased with the way events were taking care of themselves.

Chevria could not be restrained. Wild horses would not keep her in Sickbay, and Dr. Crusher and Ambassador Lelltorin had followed her reluctantly as she examined this new environment with the open wonder of a child.

The woman refused to be masked, which had astounded Lelltorin and the other two women considerably.

"No," she said. "I will not be hidden here. I would see Human society the way it should be. Do not attempt to sanitise it for my sake."

"The males!" protested Lelltorin.

"Are you offended, Lelltorin?" asked Chevria. When the Human woman declined to answer, she snorted. "If you are not, then why should I?"

"My culture is so vastly different to yours, Chevria. You... we... they may... Oh, what the hell - you'll do what you want no matter what my advice." Lelltorin shrugged in frustration. "At least allow Counselor Troi or myself to show you around the Enterprise."

Crusher glared - she had changed back into her uniform with gratitude - and clenched her jaw. "Now, this lady is going nowhere, unless it's directly to -"

Chevria waved her hand under Beverly's nose in a silencing movement. "You have my sister wives. There will be time for me later. Now, I wish to experience your... Humanity." She swept away from the perplexed Doctor, her robes billowing behind her as she headed towards the doors.

Lelltorin's brows rose, and she made a little moue at Crusher - a sort of 'I'll see what I can do' expression - and went out to the corridor after her. Troi followed, and stopped.

"Beverly," she said helplessly.

Crusher folded her arms. "Don't mind me," she said with heavy sarcasm, "after all, I'm *only* the Doctor."

Chevria was fascinated by the ship, and her personnel. As soon as Lelltorin joined her, she grabbed the other woman's arm in fierce excitement. Troi was startled by the savageness of her emotion, until she saw the reason why. It was a male crew member walking towards them. He acknowledged them, and passed by with only a flicker of his eyes to show the interest in a member of a new species.

Chevria let out a sigh, and laughed with real amusement. "It is true!" she marvelled. She strode on; the other women were hardly able to keep up with her.

"Troi Counselor," said the Injaabii, "take me to where there are more of your people on this great Starship."

Deanna exchanged an uncertain look with Lelltorin, who shook her own head. "If you wish," she said finally.

The three of them headed for the nearest turbolift and got into it, and when they reached the Ten-Forward allowed Chevria to take it all in, silently respectful of her wishes. For the first time, Lelltorin and Troi saw the woman relax and allow her true self to show for more than a glimmering. Troi experienced Chevria's wonder, her confusion and her envy in one blinding flash before it was savagely suppressed.

"So," Chevria breathed out slowly, and trod quietly like a great cat into the room. Her green eyes darted everywhere, dwelling on the way the crew sat together - male and female - talking, laughing, being generally Human - or Vulcan or whatever species they belonged to. She left her two companions, and strode over to the great windows to look out at her world as it turned slowly beneath them.

Guinan had observed the entrance of the alien woman, and moved to join Troi and Lelltorin. She smiled at them both, and nodded her head in the direction of the Injaabii. "How's she taking it?"

"Taking what?" inquired Troi, who was a little distracted by the emotions in Ten-Forward, as well as those being exhibited by their 'guest'.

"Deanna," reproved Guinan gently. "The way things are so different... Do I have to spell it out?"

"No, I guess not," the Betazoid replied with a rueful smile of her own. Troi thought, *She's bemused, and jealous of the easy interaction. Envious of the way we take this all for granted... and... she... wants it for herself. Desperately.* Troi regarded the stiff back of the alien woman - ramrod straight, her head held high. *She wants this for her people, and -*

"Ambassador Lelltorin, Counselor Troi to the bridge."

Tapping her insignia, Troi said, "Acknowledged."

Chevria turned on her heel, and rejoined them, briefly exchanging an interested glance with the Ten-Forward's hostess. "Take me with you," she commanded, her hauteur easily regained. "I would meet with this Picard, who enrages so my mate." Then she laughed, a bitter sound, and hid her thoughts.

"I don't know..." Troi hesitated, and looked at the Ambassador who had taken a deep breath through her nostrils, and released it in a snort.

"I'll take her then, Deanna," Lelltorin said, "and be damned to the consequences." She smiled mirthlessly. "If Jean-Luc doesn't like it, he can take it up with me," she announced.

Picard stood between ops and con frowning at the viewscreen. He did not turn when he heard the doors of the turbolift, but did when he realised the bridge staff were directing their attention to the new arrivals.

The Captain's brows rose to the top of his forehead when he saw the alien accompanying Troi and Lelltorin. To say he was startled was perhaps an understatement, and he exchanged quick surprised looks with Riker and Worf. At a loss for words, he stood rooted to the spot.

Lelltorin spoke first, breaking the silence. "Captain, allow me to introduce Chevria, Heratt's First."

Picard, ever conscious of his manners, bowed his head. "I'm honoured, Madam."

Chevria said nothing, and accepted the bow as her due. She turned slowly, taking in the bridge and its staff with interest. Finished in her scrutiny at last, the Injaabii stepped forward and extended her hand to the Captain, who eyed it the way he might if someone had offered him the business end of a rattlesnake.

Chevria, noting his reaction, said, "This is the correct gesture, is it not, Felicity Lelltorin Ambassador?"

"Yes," replied the Ambassador. She moved to Picard's side, and nudged him stealthily with her elbow. Her smile firmly in place, Lelltorin caught Picard's eyes and tried to tell him it was okay.

Against his better judgement, Picard took the woman's hand briefly, and dropped it - trying not to indicate how the touch had discomforted him.

Chevria hissed her laugh again. "I make you nervous, do I not, Human?"

"Yes - no!" Picard tried to hide his uncertainty, but Chevria merely nodded her head smiling thinly.

"So I should, W'Chri Picard." She stopped and regarded the Captain with curiosity. She appeared to be weighing her next words, when her attention was captured by the viewscreen. Green eyes widened, and then narrowed as she saw the Ferengi ship in all its glory in juxtaposition to the orb of Injaab.

Chevria brushed past them all, and tossed her golden mane of hair back behind her in an unconscious gesture and imitated her mate by balling her clawed hands and placing them firmly on her hips.

"So!" she snarled. She paced for a moment or two, her movements watched by a bemused and uncomfortable bridge crew. Swinging on her heel, Chevria snapped her fingers at Lelltirin. "Dallra?"

Picard stepped forward. "Madam," he began, "cha' is not aboard the Enterprise. He has had to - "

Chevria interrupted fiercely. "Silence!" She reconsidered swiftly as the outrage of the personnel made itself clear to her. "I apologise - " she ignored pointedly the intake of breath from Lelltirin - a measure of surprise - and turned her attention back to the Captain - "Picard. Where has he had to go?"

Picard inclined his head fractionally towards her. "Please, Madam. If you would be so kind as to come with me, we could discuss the situation somewhere a little more conducive to better relationships."

"Very well," she said. "Show me."

Picard bowed again. "Commanders Data and Riker, come with me. Mr. Worf - " the Captain looked directly at the Klingon - "keep us apprised of any developments from our... visitors."

Worf glared with satisfaction at the Ferengi vessel. "Aye, aye, sir."

In the observation lounge the small party seated themselves charily at the centre table. All attention was fixed on the Injaabii woman, who accepted their careful regard with open amusement. Chevria tapped her long claws on the smooth glass-like surface of the table top, a tactile attempt to cause irritation.

"Well?" she asked pointedly, and allowed her eyeteeth to show.

Picard cleared his throat. "Madam, cha' is at present making overtures to the N'Chal in the hope that Ambassador Lelltirin - "

"You are wasting your time, W'Chri Picard."

"Why do you make that assumption, Madam?" Data asked, openly inquisitive as always.

Chevria regarded the android evenly. "You are the challai, are you not?"

"Strictly speaking - " Data began, but was interrupted by Riker.

"If I may ask Commander Data's question again, Madam?" he inquired diffidently, keeping his manner formal and polite. "Why is Captain Picard wasting time?"

Chevria ran her fingers across the fabric of her robes, tweaking them into neat folds and smoothing them flat. She looked up. "Tharini will never agree to talk with him unless I intervene on his behalf. Those - " she bared all her teeth and gestured out of the windows - "those... *traders* have filled her with distrust of all things alien." A thought shadowed her face. "And this is all the doing of Heratt," she murmured as if to herself. "I shall have his blood yet, and drink it too."

Lelltorin listened to this little speech, and nodded. "Jean-Luc, Chevria is Tharini's birth sister - her twin."

Picard raised his brows. "Indeed?"

"Females are the exception rather than the rule in Injaabii society," she reminded him. "Twin daughters are rare. Very rare."

"Yes," Chevria said. "If I had been the younger sister, then it would be I and not Tharini you would have to deal with. I think I would not have been so unapproachable."

Troi spoke up. "Chevria is also in the initial stages of this unknown disease, Captain. It's in her interest to offer as much help as she is able."

"I see." The Captain turned his attention to Chevria. "Will you require our assistance in any way, Madam?"

She thought for a few seconds, and then replied, "Lend me your challai Data. If Tharini can see what you are, then she may consider the threat from the Federation to be less than that from the *kwanrici* Ferengi." She spat the epithet out in distaste.

"Whatever help we can offer," Picard said, "we will. An expeditious conclusion to this affair would be most satisfactory for both our peoples, Chevria."

The alien woman acknowledged Picard with some small appreciation. "Then we must be about our business, W'Chri Picard. Now!" she ordered.

Picard strolled down the carpeted corridor towards Sickbay, making straight for Beverly Crusher's office. Through the glass of the doors he could see her at her desk with her nose firmly planted in the computer console. Every now and then, she raised her head and wrote something down.

After he had finished studying her, the Captain went through the doors and stood in silence at the side of the desk. He coughed politely when she did not appear to have noticed his entrance.

"Preoccupied, Doctor?" he asked.

"Umm... " She looked up, a smile fleetingly altering the severity of her expression. "I'm sorry, Captain, did you say something?"

"No, Beverly."

"Oh." Crusher returned to the study of the data on the small screen in front of her, barely acknowledging the presence of the Captain beside her.

Picard tried again to reach her from the depths of her engrossment. "Any luck yet?"

For a few moments he thought she had not heard him, and as he was about to repeat his question, she glanced up and rubbed her eyes wearily.

"No," she said distractedly, and sat back heavily in her chair. "Well no, I suppose that's not strictly true. I *have* managed to find something, the only trouble is I'm having a real problem getting results which are consistent." She turned the console round so Picard could clearly see the results she was working on.

"As you can see, I've taken blood and tissue cultures and have tried to separate the factors which might be causing this disease the Injaabii have. All I've got for my trouble is conflicting data." Sighing, Crusher stretched, rotating her head to relieve the tension in her neck. "If it is viral, Captain, then I've been unable to find it, although I'm certain there are some genetic changes going on in the R.N.A. carrier strands."

"Could it be bacterial?" asked Picard curiously.

She shook her head. "No. No. Not at all. Bacteria are easy to find, and whatever this is... Well, I'm starting to think it's caused by an outside agent - like maybe a slow poison."

Picard was startled. "Poison?" When she nodded, he frowned thoughtfully. He examined the screen more carefully, and took a sharp breath. "What kind?"

"Ah, now that is proving difficult. To be frank, Jean-Luc, I don't know what I'm looking for." Crusher rose from her seat and went into the main sickbay area, then crossed to a bed where a young female lay.

She was lightly restrained by a force field, but her head twisted from side to side in an effort to try to free herself. Froth flecked her mouth, and the spittle was blood stained where she had chewed the inside of her cheeks.

"The disease - we'll call it that for the sake of expediency - acts slowly at first." Crusher crossed to another bed to check her patient, and continued. "You've got a good example of the first stage with Chevria, but after a while it escalates rapidly to the final stage as evidenced by this woman here."

They had drawn to a halt beside a comatose individual. Only the diagnostic bed gave any indication the Injaabii was alive; her motor functions were barely ticking over.

Crusher leaned against the wall, and looked down at her feet. "Something weird is going on, Jean-Luc - but I don't know what."

"Weird?" Picard asked. "In what way, Doctor?"

She stalked back to her office, and sat back down on the desk crossing her long legs. Her

face was worried as she spoke, "I... Well, I... I really don't know. The only conjecture I've got at the moment is that it is something the Injaabii are allergic to. It is almost like a vast histaminic reaction to a foreign substance, but these people are intolerant of most alien foods and don't get to eat them. It could be anything. Contact with Humans, Ferengi - any outside agent!" She studied her fingers; around the nails was the lingering remains of the dye used by Dallra to paint her palms, and she absently lifted a hand to chew at the coloured skin. Raising her head, Crusher looked at the Captain. "Jean-Luc, where are they likely to have got something to react so badly with their body chemistry? We've been so careful not to allow anything through which could cause contamination of this world."

"Oh, I would hazard a guess the Ferengi have something to do with this," Picard said firmly, remembering a box Toreq had handed to Heratt.

Crusher nodded. "Yeah," she agreed drily. She studied his face again, and said shortly, "Give."

"When I have something to give, Beverly, you can rest assured I will ensure you receive -"

"Picard to the bridge."

"Yes, Number One?"

"The Ferengi vessel has opened communications with us, sir," the First Officer's voice said.

"On my way, Commander."

Crusher jumped down lightly from the table top, and stuck her hands in her jacket pockets. Flicking her red hair out of her face, she grimaced. "About to find something out, eh?"

Picard's expression echoed her own closely. "So it would appear, Doctor."

As Picard entered the bridge he directed his next words to Worf. "Visual, Lieutenant."

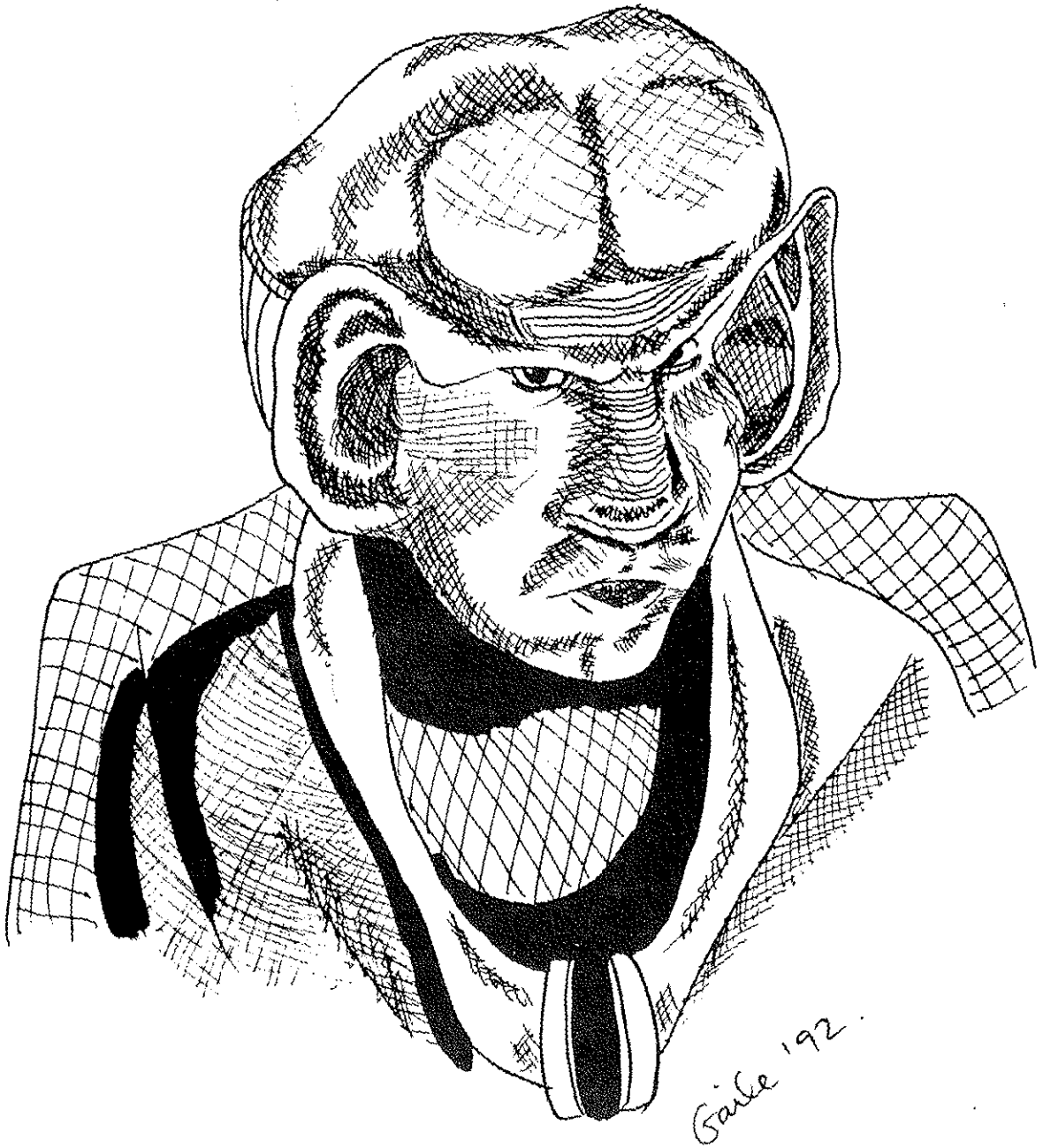
The familiar leering features of the Ferengi Daimon, Toreq, loomed onto the bridge. His First Officer and the Ferengi Doctor stood either side of him.

"Picard," he said, and waited - stretching the silence like chewing gum, ready to let it snap back if the moment could be made his.

Irritated by this gambit - *Does everybody try this not so subtle psychological tactic?* he mused - the Captain walked slowly down to stand at the centre chair. He raised his left eyebrow slightly, saying politely, "Daimon?" His voice held faint curiosity.

Everybody waited, and Picard decided the suspense had taken enough of his and his crew's precious time. "How may I be of help?"

Toreq's crafty gaze moved around the bridge crew one by one, resting imperceptibly on Data, and then flicking away. His officers shifted uncomfortably, and then the Ferengi First Officer spoke. "The android. We wish to make an offer for it."



The atmosphere aboard the Enterprise relaxed - 'that old chestnut,' it said. Picard was unconvinced. "Indeed?"

He waited, wishing the Daimon would get to the point instead of all this goddamn dancing around the issue. The Ferengi continued to grimace out of the screen, exchanging wordlessly between themselves.

"Commander Data is not for sale, has never been for sale, and never will be," Picard said at last. "I hope this is clear. Now, Toreq, I would appreciate your directness in this matter. What do you want?"

The Daimon considered. "Want, Picard? I? Rather I should ask what it is *you* want? A Galaxy Class Federation Starship in orbit about a protectorate of the Ferengi?... " He trailed off, waiting eagerly to see a reaction.

At last, Picard thought thankfully, *we begin to arrive at the crux of the matter*. Aloud, he said, "The Federation does not recognize Injaab as a member of your Protectorate." He sat nonchalantly in his chair. "As to why we are here - we were asked. It is that simple."

"Impossible," Toreq blustered. "The N'Chal would not summon you - "

Picard interrupted with relish. "Ah. But she did."

Toreq stared uncomfortably at the Captain, but Picard could not claim enough familiarity with Ferengi body language to understand the niceties of their differing postures.

The Daimon said, "We shall speak of this matter later."

The viewscreen went blank, and Worf reported, "They have cut all communications, sir."

"Hmm. Rather thought they might," Picard said. He drew a deep breath and let it out sharply, turning to Troi. "Your assessment, Counselor?"

Troi folded her arms and watched the screen for a moment before answering. "Conflict between them. There is some internal jostling for power going on. Toreq's First Officer is treacherous, and intends to remove Toreq at the first sign of failure."

The Captain nodded. "As I thought. We'll be able to capitalise on that."

"Create a little more conflict?" Riker asked, a grin lightening his features.

"Oh, yes," agreed his Captain amicably. "It really would be most unfortunate if Toreq was forced to split his attention in too many directions, wouldn't it, Number One?"

Riker managed to stifle a laugh. "Yeah."

"Perhaps you could get to work on that right away, Commander," suggested Picard.

"It'll be my pleasure, sir," Riker replied jauntily, and rose from his seat. "Worf, with me."

They headed for the turbolift, and Picard turned to Troi. "Deanna, would you see the Ambassador and find out if she's had any further communications from cha' Dallra concerning his progress with the N'Chal - " he paused, tapping one finger thoughtfully against his lips - "if any... " He allowed the sentence to trail to a halt. He added quietly, "And Chevria, Counselor."

Check on our 'guest'.

The Counselor rose from her chair. "Yes, sir," she said, and moved for the turbolift after her fellow officers.

"Mr. Data, the bridge is yours," Picard said. "I'll be in my ready room."

Troi halted outside the quarters of Ambassador Lelltorin and put her hand on the door chime. She waited for a few moments, then tried again, and a voice which sounded out of humour answered with a sharp, "Come."

Entering the room, the Counselor smiled at Lelltorin who was stabbing furiously at the computer console, and leaning over the table, obviously displeased. To her rear, the Injaabii 'guest' sat on a chair with her legs tucked neatly under her rear in an interesting configuration.

Since coming aboard, Chevria had shown remarkable willingness to assimilate all the behaviour of her Human hosts, and had discarded her flowing clothes as soon as she had been able to get something synthesised for her. She was now clad in a slim-fitting tunic, which crossed over her flat chest, in a deep and gorgeous green velvet, cut high at the thigh and leaving her slim legs visible. She disdained footwear, but adopted jewellery with a speed which defied imagination and her limbs were bedecked with thin silver and gold chains. Chevria watched Lelltorin with mild amusement in her green eyes.

Chevria's shrewd and knowing glance flicked to the Betazoid, assessing her - as always - and then she spoke. "Lelltorin Ambassador, Troi Counselor wishes to speak with you." She directed that piercing gaze back to the Counselor unwaveringly. "Do you not?" she asked.

Uncomfortable under those searchlights, Troi acknowledged the Injaabii female with a brief nod of her head, turning to the Ambassador. "Ambassador? Felicity?"

"Yes, yes, I know... Hang on a minute, will you," Lelltorin waved her hand at Deanna, who resigned herself to waiting a little longer and joined Chevria in sitting.

Finished finally, Lelltorin raised her head, turned and leaned against the table. She regarded the other two women thoughtfully. "Jean-Luc wants to know about Dallra, right?" she asked without preamble.

"Yes. The Captain is curious whether he has been able to arrange an audience for yourself and - "

Lelltorin interrupted her. "The trouble is, Deanna, that Dallra has gone missing, and Tharini's staff do not have any records of him ever having made an application - of *any* kind."

Troi stared uncomprehending, bewildered by the force of the emotions being issued by both Lelltorin and Chevria; uncertain what she should say, the Counselor remained silent biding her time until she could make a contribution.

Chevria had sprung from her seat, agitated, when Lelltorin uttered this pronouncement. "Whaaat!!!" she exclaimed, and her eyes became dark, unreadable, furious, then shielded by the nictitating membrane. "Heratt!!!" she spat, then, "Show me how to use that machine, Lelltorin Felicity. Now! I shall speak with my birth sister myself."

Alarmed, Lelltorin placed a cautionary hand on the other woman's arm. "No, you can't," she warned. "You will place yourself in direct conflict with -"

"I must." Chevria brushed aside the objections of the Human impatiently. "It is the only way forward now." She gazed earnestly into the other's eyes. "Or get the android Data, Tharini was beguiled by him."

"Too damn dangerous," the Ambassador ground out. "You cannot risk any contact." Lelltorin eyed the raging woman worriedly. "Oh, no, not that, Chevria. You can't be thinking of going to the surface at the moment. If Heratt knew you were planetside again, your life wouldn't be worth a dime - he'd have his clan brothers screaming for your blood, and Tharini would back him all the way."

Chevria paced the small confines of the living area restlessly. "I must risk this, Felicity. I am the only one who might -"

"Crap!" Lelltorin said forcefully. She grasped Chevria by the upper arms. "Listen to me. There is more at stake here than your pride, and the lives of your sister wives. If the Ferengi - and I'd gamble that this latest little development is in direct response to Federation presence - gain the upper hand in the running of your world -" She shook her head. "Do you see now, Chevria? Do you?"

Grudgingly, Chevria abandoned her stance, looked at Troi and at Lelltorin. "Someone must go - soon."

"I'll go," the Ambassador announced firmly, holding Chevria's gaze with her own.

"You can't!" put in the distressed Troi. "You're needed here, Ambassador. The Captain -"

"And you are going with me, Deanna," Lelltorin said, and smiled at her. "So you'd better get yourself dressed for the event. I'll need Lt. Worf and Commander Data as well." The Ambassador mused. "Hmmm. Riker too."

"Bill?" Troi asked. "Why do you need them? Why can't Captain Picard go with you?"

Lelltorin's mouth quirked. "He's going to be the ace up my sleeve," she said. "Though he doesn't know it yet." More seriously, she added, "A good player never reveals all his or her hand, and I'm no exception to the rule." She grinned tautly. "A devious player always makes certain the rules are bent to fit the situation."

"You cheat," stated Troi, understanding at last.

"Of course. That's the whole point of diplomacy. It's a game - a very dangerous game." Lelltorin held her hands over her face for a moment, and sighed. "We'd better give the Captain all the information he's going to need -" she held up a finger - "only what's good for him to know, Deanna. I supersede the Captain in this, and I would prefer not to make that a direct order."

Troi balked at hiding any data from Picard, and became stiff with badly suppressed outrage. Realising the Ambassador was deadly serious about making it a direct order did not make her feel any easier, and she found it difficult to concentrate on the words the other woman was speaking. Reluctantly, therefore, she offered a hesitant, "Very well." It felt as if the words had been dragged from her throat. "Just one thing though," she asked, "why can't Chevria go to Injaab?"

Chevria snarled, and her nostrils flared as Lelltorin explained the situation more clearly. "She's our 'insurance policy'. Something to keep Heratt in line, because her being here is a threat to his honour - " the Human snorted in disdain - "'cept he wouldn't know what honour was if it got up and bit him on the leg." Lelltorin discontinued her sarcasm, and went on, "The longer Jean-Luc has Chevria here, the less likely that bastard is to try anything tricky with his friends, and the more likely Tharini is to be willing to listen to us."

"Worf, Riker and Data?" Troi insisted.

The Ambassador sighed. "Because it wouldn't do for the head of a clan to go looking for trouble, would it? Oh no, he'd send his favourite wives and brothers to do the dirty work. And believe me, Deanna, we'll need Riker and Worf - and Data to make the initial representations." Lelltorin stopped, searched Troi's face intently, looking deep into troubled dark eyes. "Can I rely on you, Deanna? We'll need your help. Besides, Chevria *needs* to stay here - it may be the only way there'll be a cure found for whatever it is she's got."

Troi allowed herself to feel the Ambassador's emotions more closely. Lelltorin was intense; her emotions were mixed, annoyance uppermost, with some resignation for what she would have to do. The Counselor thought she was on the level, though it was her experience that most diplomats were devious, misleading and completely untrustworthy. *Is this one any different?* she wondered briefly.

Sighing as the relentlessness of those sentiments pushed at her, Troi reluctantly nodded her assent. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

Lelltorin stormed onto the bridge and charged into the ready room without so much as a by-your-leave, and stood in front of the Captain with a determined expression on her face. Reaching forward, she removed the book of Shakespearian Sonnets he was reading from his hand and set it on the table behind her. "Jean-Luc, look at me," she said.

Picard regarded the book for a second then switched his attention to the woman with a flicker of annoyance in his eyes. Politely, he offered her a seat, and Lelltorin declined. She just tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

Sighing, Picard said, "Yes, Fliss, you have my undivided attention now. What is it you want?"

Lelltorin slid herself onto the settee beside him, and gazed intently at him, using her best diplomatic face. Picard was not fooled by the ploy, and became correspondingly attentive.

"We've hit a snag," she explained.

Picard raised his brows. "Indeed?" He was not going to give her any help by asking the required question.

"We've lost Dallra." The words were blunt, intended to shock, and she waited for the words to take effect, to sink in.

"Remiss of you, Ambassador," Picard said, and leaned back, not rising to the bait.

Lelltorin gave a snort of irritation. "Damn you, Jean-Luc, you should be in the diplomatic corps yourself. Too damn knowing by far."

"Are we still going to play twenty questions, Fliss, or are you going to tell me the way it really is?" Picard inquired blandly, patiently.

The Ambassador gave him a quirky smile which did not quite reach her eyes, and she leaned back in the settee herself, crossing her legs. "Okay, let's see," she mused. "One: cha' Dallra is missing. Tharini does not - or will not - admit to being contacted by him. Two: I and a small contingent of your officers need to go to Injaab for an audience with the N'Chal." Picard started to speak, but Lelltorin dismissed him with a quick wave of her wrist. "I've already selected those who'll be most useful - "

"Thank you for allowing me to know." Picard spoke with tangible irony.

Lelltorin ignored him and went on. "Three: you've got to stay here with cha' Lakri who'll act as your spokesman. I'll need Commander Data."

"Who else is on the away team?" inquired the Captain. "That is, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Riker, Worf and Troi," she supplied.

Picard pursed his lips and cast her a sidelong glance. "Tea?" When she shook her head, he headed for the food slot himself. Returning, he took the cup in his fingers and said, "You've removed my senior officers - why?"

"Captain," Lelltorin said, surprise colouring her voice, "I'm sure you've many more capable people than those three who are more than willing to step into temporarily vacant shoes. Geordi La Forge is one I can think of immediately, and if he can't, or anyone else, then this must be a very shoddily run ship."

The Captain bridled slightly at the accusation, until he realised that Felicity was probably in full diplomatic mode and could probably be accused of sophistry at the moment. "Well acted, Fliss," he sounded approving. "Now the reason, if you please."

"I need them," she said simply, hoping he would not choose to ask any further.

"To help you get Dallra out because you think you know where he might be?" he speculated.

Lelltorin smiled, not giving any more.

"I don't trust you, Fliss," stated Picard. "You're not telling me everything, are you? What are you hiding?"

"Jean-Luc!" the Ambassador's tone was slightly hurt, and she even managed to look wounded. "As if I would keep anything important from you!"

The Captain narrowed his eyes at her, staring hard and intently. Exasperated, he declared evenly, "I do believe you are the most maddening woman I have ever met." His expression became wry. "You really haven't changed, have you, Fliss?"

"Matured," she murmured, and held out her hand, which he caught and raised to his lips.

"Indeed," he agreed, and kept hold of her hand.

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The away team had materialised in the centre of a busy square filled with people bustling about in a flurry of activity. The Injaabii equivalent of a livestock market was in progress, and the air was pungent with the smell of crowded herd animals. Riker wrinkled his nose unappreciatively, but looked around with avid interest.

The market place was a hive of industry; everywhere there were animals being kept in open pens - the noise of them, lowing, groaning, yelping, shrieking and bellowing - all kinds of different creatures. Further along from the livestock were stalls which held all manner of fairings - from material for the exotic gowns of the women to great jars filled with sweetmeats. Food, cooked and raw, huge sides of meat, grain and brightly coloured fruit and vegetables; sometimes an escaped animal would plod leisurely across the square before being followed by an irate owner. And the constant low babble of the challai, accompanied by the head wife of whichever master they served, although Riker was surprised to see a lot more women than he had expected. There were men about too, but they kept out of the way of the females, and they, also, were masked in public. Only their bright eyes showed through the slits in the hooded garments they wore. *Almost like the desert folk of ancient Earth*, thought the First Officer with keen interest.

Lelltorin grabbed hold of Troi's arm, letting the others know with a gesture that she wished them to help her find a place which was perhaps more conducive for a conversation.

Worf carefully kept a watch, taking in his surroundings with a Security Officer's typical zealotry. He would not take any chances where the safety of his colleagues was concerned. "Commander," he rumbled quietly, and indicating with a jerk of his head, the Klingon led the small party to an area of quietness.

The area Worf took them to was enclosed by a circle of railing. A peaceable kingdom; a garden with a few draped and fronded trees and numerous flower beds. The railing extended high overhead in an arch, and around the arch grew trembling vines of shaded bronze and silver. Occasionally, like the burst of blood falling, there was an almost lurid splash of deep and riotous crimson.

They entered and waited courteously for Lelltorin to speak. She did not for a while, merely standing and enjoying the view of the city as it stretched off into the haze of the warm and dusty afternoon.

"As good a spot as any," Lelltorin said, then she sighed. "Hard to believe there could be so much trouble on such an idyllic world."

Riker coughed politely. "Perhaps you could tell us what you have in mind, Ambassador."

Lelltorin dragged her attention back to the Commander. "Yes, gentlemen, and - " she smiled at Troi - "Deanna." She became all business, snapping out her orders. "I want you and Worf to take yourselves off in that direction - towards Heratt's city house. As unobtrusively as possible."

She glanced over them with approbation; the instructions she had given regarding their clothing had been followed through to the letter. The men were dressed in exactly the same way as the other males surrounding them, and provided no-one gave them more than a cursory glance they would pass muster. No-one could disguise the physical differences of hands or feet, particularly as they wore boots, but their eyes were hidden under the hoods, and it would take a very keen observer to spot that specific oddity.

"What about you, Ambassador?" asked Riker, not too certain he cared for this plan. "You will be without adequate protection."

"I'll have Commander Data," she pointed out. "To be frank, Commander, I really did not require either you or Worf except to go looking for Dallra. You honestly didn't think I'd be able to go to the N'Chal's palace with two males - " she spoke scornfully in an effort to put over the enormity of the proposal - "hanging onto my skirts? There would've been nothing guaranteed to slam the door in my face quicker than that."

The Klingon muttered ominously something about women and skirts, then rumbled in annoyance. "I would prefer to remain with you to ensure your safety, Madam. Commander Data, though able, is - "

The woman held her hand up, palm outwards in a silencing gesture. Firmly, Lelltorin repeated slowly, "I - do - not - require - your - assistance." She gazed up at the big Klingon and at Riker; little could be seen of her face, but from the way her jaw was set they gathered she was serious. "Have you got that?"

Data pulled aside the folds of cloth which covered his mouth. "I presume, Ambassador, that I am to fill the role of challai and initiate the talks with N'Chal Tharini?" The android added guilelessly, "The N'Chal did appear to be most fascinated by me."

Lelltorin's brow twitched slightly. "Hmmm. Something like that, Commander," she agreed calmly.

Riker watched the Ambassador, trying to catch a chink through which he could see the real person, trying to read her motives, the reasons for what she was doing. Something - a hunch, sixth sense or *something* - had him feeling edgy. He gave a mental shrug when he realised that he and Worf were being steered resolutely in the opposite direction, and that there was not a fat lot he could do about it. Still unhappy, he said, "Which building?"

"Good," she approved his acquiescence, even though she was aware of the unvoiced protests the men from the Enterprise were having difficulties with. Worf was fairly boiling to say something, and Data was perturbed by the upshot of events. Lelltorin nodded her head, and they turned to where she indicated. "If you travel through the market, take the main thoroughfare - " she halted, asking acerbically - "you're getting all this aren't you?" At their curt nods, she smiled, and went on. "It's the large white edifice, with the ornate gilding on the columns. You couldn't miss it if you tried - it's fairly noticeable."

"And you?" asked Riker pointedly.

"Will be heading through the city. Don't worry, Commander, nobody will try to stop us. Women on their own in Injaabii society are not uncommon, particularly among the leading clans." Her eyes narrowed conspicuously beneath the veils. "Besides, wearing the marriage chains is a direct instruction for any man to keep well clear, or be dealt with in an unappealing manner."

"Ambassador," hissed Troi, "we're starting to have some very curious looks sent this way." Troi felt nervous; she truly did not know quite how she had managed to become involved in this... deception.

"Then we must waste no more time, Deanna," Lelltorin murmured. She gave the two men a slight look from the corner of her eyes, then ignored them. As she turned her back and headed away, Riker heard her say, "Good luck, gentlemen."

They watched her retreating figure - closely followed by Data and Troi - disappear around a corner. Riker grimaced, and regarded Worf, who was still staring after the other three unhappily, grimly. "Riker to Enterprise," he said as he tapped his concealed communicator.

"Number One?"

"Captain, can you get a fix on the Ambassador's life signs? She's gone off without me and Worf on some errand of her own devising." He uttered a slight bark of muffled laughter. "And she's letting us go and do some castle storming."

There was momentary silence, and then the Captain's voice came. He sounded unsurprised, resigned even. "Fliss was ever determined, Will. I knew she was up to something, but couldn't quite get an admission from her." There was another brief silence, and then, "Yes, we've got a line on Troi, and Data. We will have to hypothesise that where they are, the Ambassador cannot be too far behind."

"Or forward," put in Riker drily.

"Indeed, Number One," agreed Picard.

"I'll make a further report if we are successful in obtaining Dallra's release, sir."

"Take care, gentlemen. Enterprise out."

On their own now, Riker and Worf headed in the direction of the wide, paved road the Ambassador had told them of. The market smashed into their senses, sent them reeling. Being in it was different to being on the edge of such a thing. The stench was... heady! They kept close to one another, keeping one hand on the jilbah at their sides, and observed the everyday world of the Injaabii with keen interest.

Through the clamour of voices, it was Worf who heard the timbre of tones they both recognised. "Thiver!" they both hissed at the same time.

"Dammit!" growled Riker. He scanned over the heads of the Injaabii to see if he could spot the big male who had caused them such annoyance at the feast. He could hear the man's booming voice, but could not see him anywhere.

Worf nudged him. "Over there, sir," he whispered in an undertone, and Riker followed his gaze.

Thiver was just turning a corner, accompanied by some of the members of his clan - his brothers. They were unrecognisable because of their swaddling clothes, but *his* voice was unmistakeable.

Worf grabbed Riker's arm. "Through there." He pointed to a gap in the seething crowd, and ducked into it stopping long enough to ensure the Commander was close behind. They moved swiftly into a narrow street where the top storey of the buildings overhung and shadowed them from notice.

Thiver passed the street by the thinness of a hair, and paused, almost as if he sensed something. The man removed the cloth from his mouth and nose, and drawing a deep, deep breath, turned with slitted eyes to peer into the shadows.

Riker heard Worf murmur a gross profanity under his breath, and could not help agreeing with him. Of all the bad luck! It would have to turn out the damn Injaabii would be gifted with a sense of smell to rival a Terran bloodhound; he was none too sanguine about the outcome of this little encounter.

Riker glanced wildly about for some means of escape, but nothing came to view immediately, and instead he made a beeline for another narrow opening. He could hear the Klingon soft-footed behind him, and they turned into the aperture; it did not gain them time or a route of escape, as they found themselves in a tavern like building. Among the customers sat a number of Ferengi - all in close groups, curiously separate from the Injaabii - and everybody in the establishment looked up to stare hostilely at the intruders.

"Out of the frying pan," muttered Riker, and edged himself out the way he had come in. He swore expressively, and saw that Worf was moving cautiously along the perimeter of the wall towards the light at the end of it. At the opening they could see a fence and the bodies of milling herd beasts that looked something like Terran antelopes, but with an arrangement of horn no Earthly creature had ever had.

Whispering, Worf said, "We'll have to make our way among those animals, sir. They may serve to disguise our scent, and to throw Thiver off the trail."

Riker nodded his agreement, and without wasting further time on discussion they headed posthaste to the dimly seen enclosure.

Cursing the restrictions the native costume placed on him, Worf hiked up the garment as much as he could, unbuckled the jilah and hurled it over first, then started the climb over the fence. Reaching the top, he swung a leg over and balanced uncomfortably on the edge; he held a hand out to the Commander and helped to haul him up. Looking into the enclosure, Worf estimated the drop to be about three metres - more or less. Both of them could hear the voices of Thiver and his cohorts taking up the chase and now there was a new factor. The customers of the ale house were on the trail as well, and all after blood.

"There's nothing for it, sir," the Klingon said. "We'll have to jump. The ground looks quite soft there." And he pointed to a knoll covered loosely with straw.

"I'll take your word for it," replied his commanding officer, and they both launched themselves for the patch of soft ground. As they flew through the air, the creatures in the compound scattered like pigeons in the wind, bounding and bleating pitifully in terror.

Landing on his feet, Worf helped Riker up from the ungainly position he had fallen into. "Are you all right, Commander?"

"I'm fine, Worf," answered Riker dusting straw and soil from his clothing, then he retrieved the two swords from where they had fallen, throwing one to Worf, who snatched it out of the air. Resettling the jilah against his hip, the First Officer strode quickly into the centre of the beasts with Worf close behind. Taking his bearings, Riker announced, "Thattaway, Worf."

They started towards the gates at a jog, causing more jostling and blowing of air and rolling eyes from the animals which pushed and shoved against one another in a vain effort to get away from what was frightening them.

"If they keep this up," Worf growled over the noise of the creatures, "Thiver will not have to look hard to find us." Then he ducked down low to get between a female and her calf,

and was kicked hard for his trouble. Limping from the blow to his thigh, Worf still managed to get to the gates first, and straining at the bolt which secured them contrived to open them just as Riker joined him.

Riker looked at the Klingon. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

Worf returned the gaze narrowly. "Yes."

Riker gave a grin, then waved his arms up and down vigorously weaving in and out of the 'cattle' hollering as he went. They responded by running backwards and forwards in small groups, then rushed for the open gate where Worf added to their fear by waving his own arms about and swatting the odd rump.

A distraction thus guaranteed, they quickly headed to the direction they had been taking before the untimely disruption of their plans. They were progressing satisfactorily until a cry of, "There're the aliens!" went up, and they picked up their heels and fled as fast as their feet would carry them in an opposite course to the noise of a baying crowd.

Cursing fluently, Riker cornered a bend at full gallop and took a welcome breath of air as the Klingon grabbed him and pulled him into another blind alley.

As they waited, the thundering feet of the mob swept past, and Riker allowed himself a small smile of triumph as he leaned back thankfully on the cool brick of the wall.

Taking a moment to compose themselves, they moved gingerly out of the alley into the open again. Side by side they walked at an almost leisurely pace, but in watchful, wary silence.

They came close to getting away with it; close, but not quite.

Feeling a tap on his shoulder, Worf flicked his head round to see an unwelcome visage gloating at him. And then they were surrounded on all sides by Thiver's companions.

"Great," muttered the First Officer. "Just marvellous." Then arranging his features into a grim mask Riker returned the gloat measure for measure. Coldly, he weighed up the chances he and Worf had of getting away without a fight, but, seeing the eager light in the now bare faces of their adversaries, he doubted if talking would do much good.

Worf moved the folds of cloth from his mouth. "What do you want?"

Thiver walked arrogantly round the two officers in overweening confidence, and smirked. Derisively, he spoke over his shoulder to his brothers. "You see, it speaks." And they joined in with his laughter.

Worf's face grew very stiff - even for him - and followed the Injaabii with his eyes. Brittle with rage, the Klingon remained silent, clenching his fists. "Sir," he said to Riker, and felt Thiver's open hand across his cheek in a blow - the claws raking the skin left a bloody trail.

Riker held the Klingon's arm. "Worf!" he said warningly, and felt the tension in the arm ebb slowly out of taut muscles. Civilly, the Commander inclined his head to Thiver and lied through his teeth. "We're on our way to see your brother, Heratt, Thiver. We're glad we met up with you - " he cleared his throat - "as we seem to have lost our way."

The Security Chief regarded him with interest, and kept his peace.

Thiver hissed with laughter. "Indeed?" Then baring his fangs, the man went on, "In that case... Commander?" At Riker's nod, he laughed again. "In that case, Commander and... Klingon, let us make your presence known to Heratt. I feel certain he will be... *overjoyed* to see you."

The Injaabii men pressed the two officers forward, and frogmarched them down the road to the Surajh's house. Coming to a halt, Thiver called up to the guard on the balcony overlooking the road, and the man leaned over the parapet to eye the newcomers.

"Guests!" shouted Thiver. "Guests for our brother to... entertain!" Raucous laughter greeted this witticism.

The doors opened like a great maw. Riker and Worf were hustled into the interior. It was startlingly empty of life, and Thiver showed his surprise at these circumstances by dropping the blustering attitude. Ripping off his outer garments, the man disappeared for a moment only to reappear with an expression of considerable consternation on his face; an expression which he removed as soon as he came in sight of the two Enterprise officers.

Thiver walked around them, a hand on his chin as he mused out loud. "Now what do I do with you? Shall I wait? Or shall I entertain you?... Perhaps I should entertain myself and the brothers?"

As the questions were purely rhetorical, and neither Worf or Riker felt much inclined to answer, they just kept tracking his movements with their eyes, even though when he passed behind them both felt the warning prickle of hairs rising on their necks. The centre of their shoulder blades ached with an intensity incredible to describe as they waited for blows which would either cripple or kill. When they did not come, neither was sure whether it was an ill thing or good.

Thiver finally stopped his appraisal of them, and stroked his chin some more; his grey eyes were slits in the dark face, and the pupils narrow inky lines. A small smirk crept onto his thin mouth, tilting the edges almost imperceptibly, and hawking hard, he cleared his throat and nose and spat with creditable accuracy at Worf.

The goblet of mucus and spittle landed splattering the Security Chief's dusty boots and legs. Worf thought hard about the attempts to aggravate him; he knew Thiver regarded him as a challenge, that the man had been - no, *was* eager to cause a confrontation, wanted to pit his strength against Worf's own. The Klingon's nostrils flared in the effort to keep his temper on an even keel, and he turned his head slightly to see the Commander's reaction, then returned his head to its starting position to gaze with eyes hidden under a beetling brow.

Riker's face was an impassive mask. He knew too what the Injaabii was aiming for with a direct insult of that kind, and in his heart of hearts the First Officer would not - *could* not - blame the Klingon if he did something about it.

Apparently, what Worf saw flickering in the Commander's steely blue eyes reassured him on his next course of action. When Thiver stepped up to Worf, and slapped him hard on the face again leaving a further trail of claw marks, he hit him back with a hook to the man's midriff, following it through with a knee impacting solidly with Thiver's face, and while he was down a good kick in the groin. Thiver groaned, retched, then came up swinging. Worf moved aside and hands clenched together, smashed them firmly into the middle of the man's back; then gripping Thiver's head by a handful of hair hauled it back so sharply the bones could be heard creaking. As this took place in seconds, the brothers did not act immediately, then realising what the Klingon was about they started to move in to help.

Worf was quicker than they, and so was Riker who had drawn a phaser from beneath his garments and levelled it at them. "Don't be foolish, gentlemen," the First Officer warned, waving the weapon at them. The clan halted in their move to the two officers. The Commander directed a question to Worf. "You okay?" And when his companion gave a curt nod, tightened his mouth. "Did that help, Worf?"

"It was... satisfactory, sir." Then, one arm around his antagonist's throat, the other placed on the side of his head, Worf said harshly, "Injaabii anatomy, sir? Do you know whether their necks can be twisted through 360 degrees? Shall I find out?"

Riker sucked in a thoughtful breath, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the uncertain Injaabii, never wavering his hand from a line of fire. "Dunno, Worf," he said coolly, and smiled an unpleasant smile. "What do you think?"

"Perhaps," Worf suggested evenly, no hint of anger in his deep voice though his guts churned with humiliation, "if Thiver were to suggest they show us where Dallra is?" A noise of protest from the prone Injaabii provoked Worf into twisting his head sharply, causing the man to sweat with pain. "You may talk," he intoned quietly, mildly even, the sound at variance with the action, "when I, or Commander Riker, allow it."

Riker glanced over at the Klingon from the corner of his eyes. "Good thinking," he approved. "Shall we go, 'brothers'?" And gestured neatly with a flexing of his weapon hand towards the doors leading to what he assumed would be the inner quad if all Injaabii houses were built along similar lines.

Before they made any headway a man stepped forward, bowing, making a salutation to them; there was no mockery in it, only honest admiration. Becoming erect, the man stared at them with toffee coloured eyes. "We are honour bound to so assist you. Release our brother, we will do you no further harm."

Riker angled his head sharply at him, and cocked an eyebrow. "Reeally?" He set his mouth, waiting for an indication he could trust them. He did not - that was clearly obvious from his stance.

"Honour!" scoffed Worf, and wrenched Thiver's neck a little further - he turned an interesting pale purple colour.

"I give you my name," the man said hurriedly, taking in the wretched position of his clan brother. "Will that suffice to show we will keep our peace within these walls, until the arrival of the Surajh?"

"Your name then," barked the Klingon, and Riker nodded.

"Yes, your name, if you please."

Dropping his head to his chest, the male mumbled. "It is Blatar, I am clan brother to Thiver, and Heratt is my liege lord."

Riker, his voice holding a whole octave of irony, said, "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. Now, Blatar, does the honour you've been so kind to grace us with hold for these?" The phaser pointed at the other members of the clan.

Blatar's features were inscrutable, wooden, as he replied deadpan, "Yes."

"Excellent," the Commander said, and smiled coldly. "Now, if you would be so good as to take us to Dallra..."

"Brother," Blatar acknowledged, and led the way through the inner square to a lift. Worf dragged his prisoner with him, taking some small measure of reparation in the fact that Thiver would be hurting.

The four of them got into the lift, and they headed downwards at a hissed, brief command from Blatar. It travelled only a short distance before coming to a halt, and the doors slid open to disgorge them into a cool and well-lit corridor. The passageway was painted plainly, and there were doors along its sides.

Worf looked around, and shoved the Injaabii in his grasp away from him. "Sir, this is a prison."

"Hmmm. Dungeon, more likely, Worf." Riker peered along the corridor. "Okay, Blatar, where is Dallra?"

The man extended a lean finger and pointed downwards. "Fifth door on the left." He bent down to Thiver, and retrieved from his robes a device which he handed to Riker, who examined it. "It will open the door," he explained.

Not taking his eyes from the two Injaabii, Riker tossed the item to Worf who caught it and headed for the indicated door. Pointing the gadget at the door, he pressed the release button and it swung open.

The challai was sitting on a cushion within his cell, and he appeared to be at rest. However, as Worf made a move to him, Dallra's eyes snapped open and he regarded the Klingon quite calmly.

"Cha'," Worf began, "are you unharmed?"

Uncoiling himself, Dallra saluted Worf. "I am as you see me." Then he went out of the door and peered aloofly at Thiver and Blatar. He bowed to them, and turning to Riker said, "We must leave this place before Heratt returns."

"Amen to that," the First Officer replied, and patted his insignia. "Riker to Enterprise, three to beam up."

As they stepped down from the platform, Riker turned curiously to Dallra. "Can you tell us why Heratt didn't harm you, cha'? I'd've thought having you off the scene permanently would have made things considerably more difficult for us?"

"So they would," agreed the challai, unruffled. "His hand was stayed because he is my birth sibling, and my death at his hands would be punishable by the removal of his lands and wives." Dallra could see the amazement of this news echoed in both of the officers as they exchanged stunned glances with one another.

"You're his... *brother* brother?" said Riker, dumbfounded.

"Yes, honoured one." He bowed, deeply, then, "I must return to the Ambassador."

"Cha', Ambassador Lelltorin is already on Injaab arranging an audience with the N'Chal." Riker was making his way out of the transporter room, when he heard the effect his statement had on the challai.

Concerned, Worf reached Dallra's side. "Are you?... "

Dallra put a halt to any further questioning by stopping the wailing noise, and flicked the nictitating membrane over his eyes. Momentarily, the opaque skin whitened the black, and then he spoke again. "Then there is no time to lose. I must speak with W'Chri Picard."

Troi looked doubtfully at the android at her side, and they both peered up the steep walls of the residence of the N'Chal, Tharini. It was another tall white building with impressive spires, and great cathedral-like doors. The stone exterior was engraved with reliefs of what the Counselor presumed to be ancient Injaabii gods and goddesses - certainly the building was very old.

Data ran his tricorder over the building. "It is approximately five hundred and fifty years old, Counselor, although some of the fretwork covering the window openings is considerably older," he said in reply to her unspoken query; he peered at the instrument again, adjusting it slightly, obviously abstracted. "Most intriguing." He tilted his head at the Ambassador. "There are only females present in this building."

Lelltorin regarded the android with... Troi could not place the expression on her face as the other woman's emotions were clamped down so powerfully she was unable to 'read' her accurately.

"Then," the Ambassador began calmly, "we'll just be two more, won't we, Commander?" She approached the doors, and got to her knees, putting her forehead to the cold, red streaked marble which paved the area surrounding the residence. "Noble Lady, N'Chal Tharini, we come in response to the need of your people. I beg that you will see fit to allow these unworthy ones to enter."

Nothing happened for what seemed like a very long time, and then those great doors swung slowly inwards revealing long, long aisles stretching off in five directions. An inflectionless female voice sounded. "Enter."

Rising gracefully, Lelltorin made her way into the vast building, and stood on the threshold with Troi and Data. The voice repeated itself. "Enter and be welcome, Lelltorin Ambassador of Terra and Federation. Enter Troi, sister to Lelltorin. Enter Data... challai to the W'Chri Picard. You are well come."

Troi was quite simply awed by the building. It vaulted overhead seemingly endlessly; the ceiling was opaque, an irridiscent mother-of-pearl strengthened by wisps of metallic material echoing the fretwork covering the windows. She strained her head upwards and backwards. The overall effect was such that the light filtered through in streams of rainbow colour, with here and there the sun causing runnels of fire on the gilding.

"How old did you say this place was, Data?" asked the Counselor again; her tones were muted slightly.

"Five hundred and fifty Terran standard years. The Injaabii year is shorter than Earth's by fifty three point two oh four days." The android, as usual, responded helpfully with

unsolicited information, and he continued to swing the tricorder around. "That way."

Data set forth confidently, without checking to see if the two women were following. They were close on his heels, and when he took a sharp turning they nearly fell over each other in their haste to keep up.

"You must have been here, Fliss?" inquired Troi with a glance at her travelling companion. She was surprised to see the Ambassador shake her head in a quick negative. "No?"

"After the Ferengi, damn their eyes, managed to insult Tharini, she would have nothing further to do with offworlders. No, this audience is purely a result of the machinations of Chevria and her challai brethren... and Data played a part in that too." Lelltorin kept on walking, following Data's lead. "If Chevria had come here on her own behalf, her life would have been forfeit to Heratt. It's all hellishly complicated."

"I would be interested, Ambassador," said Data politely, "to hear your explanation. The Enterprise's computer records seem to be curiously lacking in information regarding Injaabii society. This is an oversight I find peculiar."

"To be honest," agreed Troi, "so do I."

"There's nothing odd about it," stated Lelltorin baldly. "These people simply wanted as little to do with the Federation as possible on a cultural level. They feel, at least it's my understanding they feel, that they couldn't interact on a day to day basis with multiple species with equal sexes. Those with no recognisable sexes caused even greater consternation as the challai could not interact without the presence of males or females." She and Troi turned as Data did, and then continued. "So, this, for better, and certainly for worse, is what they decided on, and there was very little data allowed out."

They kept walking, Lelltorin's explanation running through their minds.

"Here," Data announced suddenly, and put his tricorder back into his robes.

More doors. Carved silvery wood, and they swung inwards to an immense room of overwhelming simplicity. Starkly white, the floors paved in repetitive, whorled patterns, and pillars of Ionic proportions heading away.

"Don't they do *anything* on a small scale?" asked Troi plaintively, and they started up the middle of the room.

The Counselor became gradually aware of the impingement on her senses of the presence of people. Women. Their emotions were fiercely unfettered in this place, and the force of them was startling. Her steps faltered as they came to a raised platform on which sat another woman who appeared no different from the many they had seen before.

She leaned forward, an elbow on her knee, her sharp chin propped on a well-manicured hand. Her keen emerald green eyes proclaimed her relationship with Chevria, but if it had not been for those orbs fixed on their party, then Troi would not have recognised her for such.

The black hair was bound in metal wound from skull to tip. Her gown flowed in generous folds to mid-calf, cinched tightly at the waist with a wide belt from which hung a plain, and obviously functional, dagger.

Lelltorin bowed her head deeply - thus identifying the platform's occupant exactly - then lifted it to face the woman on the platform. "N'Chal," she said, in deeply reverential tones.

Riker paced up and down the small ready room disquieted, then stopped long enough to register the fact that his Captain was engrossed in the report from Beverly Crusher on his table. "Sir," he protested, "we must take some action. This is a flagrant disregard of the - "

"Number One." Picard's voice, unnaturally stern, stopped him in mid-stride. "What would you have me do?" As Riker opened his mouth to speak, he held up his hand. "If I were to make a move to the N'Chal now, the Ferengi would regard it as open aggression. Patience, Will, is what is called for here. I do not want to force a confrontation - I have no doubt Daimon Toreq will attempt to coerce us before we've waited too long." Picard resumed his reading.

"Aye, sir," said the First Officer, swallowing his uneasiness but remaining unconvinced. He headed back to the bridge to take the con. Re-entering, he asked, "Worf, any more news on the Ferengi?"

The Klingon checked his panel. "Negative, Commander. All systems on the Ferengi vessel still stand as before."

Riker joined Worf at the tactical station and eyed the readout. He huffed a breath out, and more to himself, pondered, "What the hell are they *doing* out there?"

A deep voice at his side rumbled, "Waiting."

Riker shared a look with Worf. "Yes." He stroked his chin, and stared at the vessel on the viewscreen. "But why? They know we've got Dallra back. And they know we know for definite it was them who've arranged the problem with Tretharian..." He trailed off. "Dammit!"

Worf sympathised wholeheartedly with the feelings of his senior officer; sitting here doing nothing made him itch.

As they stood waiting for something to happen - or not, as the case might be - the doors to the turbolift slid open with a soft swoosh, and Crusher walked down the ramp to the ready room. She did not even turn her face to acknowledge the others and her features were set in a grim and unhappy mask.

Uh oh, thought Riker. He addressed her before she went through to the Captain. "Bad news, Bev?"

Crusher started. "Oh, Will!" She jabbed a finger at the ready room doors. "The Captain in there?"

"Yes, Doctor," said the First Officer, his voice faintly tinged with interest.

"Good. Did you ask me something, Commander?" The Doctor tipped her head at him as she waited for a reply. The doors to the ready room opened, and she decided to go in. "Can it wait? We'll talk later, huh?"

"Sure, Doctor," he replied to her retreating back, and turning back to Worf lifted an eyebrow. "What d'you make of that?"

Worf regarded the closed doors. "Intriguing."

"Oh for a glass," murmured Riker, and received an blank stare from Worf. "Just kidding," he said.

Picard frowned. "Doctor?"

Crusher launched straight into her speech. "Jean-Luc, the Injaabii women are definitely being poisoned. I don't know what the Ferengi - "

"Can you be certain it's the Ferengi who put poison in the Tretharian, Doctor?" he interrupted her quickly. "We cannot have unfounded allegations - you must be sure."

The Doctor tapped her report which sat on the table in front of Picard. "Have you read it?"

Picard indicated a seat, to which she shook her head, and he leaned back tugging his uniform into place. "Most of it," he began uncertainly. Changing tack, he asked, "Beverly, you seem unusually agitated. Are you experiencing difficulties in the manufacture of an antidote for the poison?"

Crusher set her hands on the edge of the table and leaned forward over it towards him. "Captain, what I've found is unbelievable - I can scarcely believe it myself and I've checked the data."

Picard remained calm. "What have you found, Doctor?"

Crusher set her jaw, and ground it out. "The Injaabii are allergic to their own drug. Whatever the Ferengi have put into it as a pheromone has aggravated the problem to a level I've never seen except in rare cases of toxic substance addiction. God damn it, Jean-Luc - " she almost shouted - "I don't bloody well know if I can synthesise a cure - it's locked into the blood molecules and is changing the genetic information as I watch." The Doctor straightened, and ran her hand through her hair wearily. Then spotting something inanimate, she went over to it and gave it a good kick. "Damn!"

"The sterility and madness?" asked Picard quietly, concerned, ignoring the Doctor's little outburst of emotionalism and eyeing his mistreated furniture.

"Oh, a natural consequence of the addiction. The ovum are perverted during meiotic division, and are not viable either fertilized or not. The result is a higher than normal rate of non-implanted foetuses, therefore miscarriage, and if they do implant successfully... Premature birth, genetic defects fatal to life - too many chromosomes, too few; you name it, they've got the lot." She sighed. "What's *really* cute about this whole business is that these people have a breeding season, and if they're not impregnated or don't get to bear any viable offspring the hormones start to attack the nervous system. Guess what the end result of that is?" Crusher did not wait for Picard to answer. "Yup. Madness."

Worried, the Captain inquired, "Chevria?"

"Hah!" Crusher threw up her hands in despair. "I don't know. Maybe if you can find out what it is the Ferengi have poisoned the stuff with."

"We'll certainly try, Doctor." A shadow passed over his face. "Have you asked her if she has any of the unguent the Ferengi gave her husband, Beverly? It could prove efficacious."

"No. To be honest, it didn't cross my mind, I've been so tied up in these results," she answered truthfully, then concern crossed her features. "If they're correct, these results, Jean-Luc, there are implications for the whole of the Federation. If - and I know it's a big 'if' - the effects of Tretharian are like this on its native population, what effect will it have on other species?"

"I don't believe a drug like Tretharian would have been introduced to the Federation and made generally available if it had not undergone rigorous and strenuous trials regarding its safety." Picard shook his head in denial. "Highly unlikely. *Extremely* improbable. Besides which," he concluded, "you are forgetting the Tretharian has been tampered with."

Crusher shook her own head. "Maybe. And my premise regarding the implications is not so unlikely, Captain. A few false results, a ready market for a new 'wonder drug', and greed. The perfect start for any nefarious operation." She backed down slightly in response to the hard look the Captain was according her. "Okay, so it's a wild guess, but not entirely improbable, is it?"

Picard rubbed his forehead, and sighed. "Worf, raise the Ferengi."

A deep, "Acknowledged, sir," sounded in the ready room.

"What are you going to do?" Crusher asked.

Picard's face was severe as he looked at her. "I'll do what they least expect, I'll ask for a supply of the 'exotic unguent' they gave to Heratt, and offer them what Worf and Commander Riker prepared as a little surprise for them earlier in trade." He exchanged a glance with her. "In other words, Beverly, I'm going to haggle. And as we already know they'll double-cross us at the first opportunity, we can circumvent any plotting they've got in store. You, in the meantime, can find out if Chevria has a supply of the stuff to analyse."

He got up and walked to the doors with Crusher at his side, entering the bridge just as the viewscreen flickered into life. The Ferengi Daimon did not try very hard to conceal his interest. The small eyes peered out of the screen with greed lurking in their depths. "Picard," Toreq acknowledged as the Captain came into view.

"Daimon," replied Picard. He sat in the centre chair and deliberately settled himself to a comfortable position. Leaning back, the Captain allowed himself a small smile to the Ferengi. He tilted his head and said, "The unguent you gave to Heratt, Toreq. I would like some."

The Daimon stared out of the screen with a startled, somewhat puzzled expression on his features. Leaning into the viewer - the bridge crew got an uncomfortably close look at Toreq's mouth which was full of sharp teeth - he examined Picard's face; a careful, slow scrutiny which made several members of the bridge crew veery ill at ease. Toreq's next question was blunt and to the point. "Why?"

"I'm... curious." Picard regarded the Daimon, and added, "I do have something to trade. Something of benefit to you personally, Toreq."

An avaricious flicker passed over the other's countenance. He repeated slowly, "Benefit to me?"

"Mmmm," responded Picard non-committally. "If you're interested, of course, that is."

"The android?" asked Toreq with relish, and mentally licked his lips over such a gain. Picard's following words were a great disappointment.

Don't they ever give up? he thought incredulously. "No. As I believe I've mentioned before, Commander Data is *not* for sale. No, this is something of even greater value - something which will make you a very rich man indeed."

Behind, Picard heard Worf shift slightly as he caught on, and beside him, his First Officer carefully placed a hand over his mouth. The blue eyes above the hand were anything but sober.

"A trick," stated the Daimon, leaning even further into the screen.

Picard had the grace to look offended, and said, his voice carefully modulated into pained tones. "Most certainly not, Toreq. If you wish you may examine the goods yourself to show our good will." He smiled.

"I don't trust you, Picard," the Ferengi said baldly. "You want this too badly."

The Captain inclined his head regally. "That is true, Daimon. As you are aware, there is an illness affecting 50% of the Injaabii population - "

"What concern is that of mine?" Toreq interrupted rudely, and edged away.

Picard put on his stern face. "My primary concern is not whether anyone is at fault, but rather, how might the Federation help a people who requested, when all's said and done, our aid. For my medical team to look at the perfume you traded for the Tretharian would assist us in our search for a cure."

"Ask Heratt, Human," Toreq sneered, "and see what response you get from him - "

The Captain said smoothly, "Then you are not interested in a trade, Daimon?"

Off-screen, and therefore out of view of the bridge of the Enterprise, the Daimon's rebellious crew stirred angrily. That their Daimon could even *consider* turning down the prospect of a profit, and an easy one at that, was unthinkable! Unheard of!

Picard addressed the Klingon. "Mr. Worf, cease communications."

"Aye, sir," Worf replied with satisfaction, and folded his arms waiting for a comeback from the other ship. His console did not disappoint him. "Captain," he rumbled, "the Ferengi are indicating they wish to speak to us."

Picard swung his chair slightly so he was better able to see his Chief of Security. "Really?" He imagined the scene on Toreq's bridge, and made a slow count of fifty, examining the arm of the chair carefully, then addressed Riker. "Would waiting a little longer serve our purpose, Number One, or do you think I should speak to the Daimon now?"

Riker thought very carefully about the question. "Difficult," he said. "Depends if you want a new Daimon to deal with, or whether you feel you can get along with Toreq. That'll be a moot question though, soon, sir."

"I agree, Number One. Worf, open - "

"Frequencies open, sir," responded Worf, who had anticipated his Captain and Commander Riker.

"Excellent," Picard said. The screen showed a far less certain Toreq than the bombastic individual who had been so self-sure minutes ago. "You want to talk?" asked the Captain with cool detachment.

"I am ready to talk trade," agreed Toreq reluctantly.

"Very good. If you would care to examine the goods, Daimon, you will be welcome aboard the Enterprise for the time it takes you to make your decision," said Picard agreeably.

Sullenly, Toreq stared at him, then he wetted his teeth and answered, "There will be three to board." Without further talk, the screen went blank, and the familiar shapes of Injaab and its primary appeared.

"Number One, Mr. Worf, if you would be so good as to escort the new arrivals to view the goods and arrange for the exchange - even though we know it'll do us no good." Picard added on as an afterthought. "Ah, yes, Will, take Dallra with you to examine the perfume, and get a good look at Toreq. I want a positive identification."

"Very good, sir," replied Riker, and headed to the turbolift. He stopped, turned and said, "Sir, if we need to - "

"Whatever you decide will be good enough for me, Number One. Should you need me, I will be in Sickbay."

"Either you have some, Chevria, or you don't," said Crusher, and waited for the woman to reply. She tapped her foot impatiently - really, there was no time for this nonsense.

Chevria stroked the forehead of her sister, then gave a sigh. "I have none, Crusher, not here. In my home, yes." The Injaabii turned her seeking, emerald gaze on the Doctor. "You ask for a reason, physician sister. What does the perfume contain?"

Dr. Crusher checked her patient's readings, and realigned the diagnostic tables efficiently. Truthfully, she replied, "I don't know, Chevria. Could be nothing. I'm clutching at straws here. The toxicologists are going all out - I'm exhausted, and not at my best - but..." She allowed the word to sit for a moment, certain she had Chevria's undivided attention. "Well, there might be a specific substance which causes - *helps* cause - the symptoms you and your sisters have been experiencing."

The green eyes looked inwards for a long moment. "I see," Chevria said. "It is imperative then, is it not, that you have some to work on."

"Yes."

The mouth thinned, and Chevria hissed, her fangs becoming prominent - did Crusher imagine it, or were they longer? - then she growled. "Heratt is a fool, and my sire was a fool to mate me to such a one, as were my mother's challai." She turned her regard on the Doctor. "Then I must away to my home, Beverly Crusher, no matter what stands in my way, so that

you may find a cure for my sisters, and find hope for my people."

Beverly looked doubtful. "I don't know..." Her voice was unsure, but an impatient noise from the other woman made her meet her eyes. "The Ambassador left instructions you were not to be allowed to Injaab whatever the circumstances, Chevria," Crusher pointed out, "and she was quite explicit."

"I do not doubt it," Chevria replied. For a moment Crusher thought she would bow to the inevitable, the unavoidable - she was wrong!

Heratt's mate, his First, swung sharply on her heel and marched out of Sickbay. Crusher did not wait to find out if she was coming back, but charged straight after her, running to catch the fleet-footed woman.

As the Captain arrived he saw them leaving Sickbay, and strode after them. "Beverly," he called, and saw them stop. He could see Crusher gesticulating wildly to Chevria, and trying to restrain her. Reaching their side he asked, "What's the problem?"

When the Doctor had explained in brief, Picard shook his head regretfully. "Having you on board this ship, Madam, has placed us in a questionable situation. I hold you as a... hostage for the safety of my ship and my crew. If you were to return to Injaab, what guarantee have I that your government would restrain themselves from retaliation?"

"None - but that is a risk you must measure against the possible gains, W'Chri Picard. If I succeed in returning to you, and I also bring the perfume with me - " Chevria put a hand on the Doctor's arm - "if Beverly Crusher finds a cure because of the risk I am willing to take, what benefits the Federation then?" She nodded her head. "Ahh. I see you have already thought of these things."

"If you get caught..." Crusher protested, and looked to her Captain for a positive sign of agreement.

Picard said nothing; his features were composed carefully while he mulled over the sticky little problem he found himself in. "I will have to deny that you ever came aboard."

Chevria smiled, and Crusher protested, "You can't, Jean-Luc! It's too dangerous! What if - ?"

"There is an old saying, Doctor, about 'What ifs'." Picard turned to Crusher. "I'll try to ensure Chevria is as safe as we can possibly make her, Beverly. It is also beneficial to us if she comes back." He made the Injaabii woman a slight bow. "She is an asset rather than a liability."

"We understand one another, Picard Captain-of-the-Enterprise," approved Chevria. She inclined her regal head fractionally, and took herself off to the turbolift leaving the Captain and Dr. Crusher standing quietly together in the corridor.

"Jean-Luc," Beverly said darkly, and he flicked a gaze at her.

"Doctor," he replied, but before she could utter another word, he made his own way to the turbolift, leaving her frustrated and irritated behind him.

"Dammit, Captain," she growled, "what if she *doesn't* come back?" He did not hear, and Crusher breathed out heavily, thrusting her hands into her pockets. She stood alone for a

while, then went back into Sickbay where she could - *might* possibly do some good.

Dallra went back to the observation lounge with Worf and Riker still distressed because he had been unable to speak to his mistress. He trailed behind the Commander deep in misery; his thoughts were churning with the information he had learned from his birth sibling. *Heratt, curse you for the ill-considered, short-sighted fool you are. Damn you for your treachery. Damn you that you could not leave the handling of our people's affairs in the hands of my brethren where it belonged. Greed and power. The lust for it - were you so jealous of me, my brother?*

Without noticing where he sat, the challai merely swept into a chair and bowed his head to his chest. A voice intruded in his consciousness, one to whom he owed an explanation of sorts. Raising them at last, Dallra's obsidian eyes were wholly transparent with concern.

"Cha'?" the voice said, and he realised it came from Picard. "Are you quite well?"

"Well enough," he heard his own voice say as if from a far, far distance. *Enough*, he thought, and came back to the reality of the situation, getting a firm grip on himself. "What do you want to know, W'Chri Picard?"

"Heratt?"

"My... birth brother, he has sold our people for a few out of date, out-moded ships of inferior design in an effort to get into space." Dallra fell silent, and stared instead, brooding, out of the windows.

"The Tretharian?" persisted the Captain.

"The Ferengi wanted it. Heratt arranged for them to get it, and they supplied the - " he glanced around the table, his face scornful and his teeth bared in an awful grimace - "*ships*. The Ambassador is in grave danger while she and her staff remain on Injaab, Captain."

"Surely not, cha'?" responded the Captain. "She is with the N'Chal, is she not?"

Painted palms spread themselves in a supplicating gesture. "If Chevria is also on Injaab, then both their lives are forfeit if Heratt becomes aware... " Dallra trailed off; he felt it was unnecessary to go into any greater detail - the ramifications of the situation were clear enough.

Picard wiped his hand across his mouth, and closed his eyes briefly. He glanced at Riker. "Over our heads, Number One?"

The Commander stroked his beard. "By a couple of metres, sir. At least."

Dallra hooded his eyes, then spoke again. "W'Chri Picard, my people are not ready to recognise that yours are *all* challai, and therefore equal. *We* must change before my species can come whole to the Federation and ask for membership of that body. To see there is no difference between the peoples of the Federation, or your males or females, is too great a shock for the hierarchies to sustain yet. Perhaps one day - with patience, further help and continuous contact... in thirty years... Who knows? One thing is clear - Heratt must be stopped!"

"No-one would deny that, cha'," said Picard. "The question is - *how* do we stop him?"

Dallra considered, and snarled the words out. "Chevria must call blood challenge."

Worf asked quietly, "What is that?"

"A fight to the death in the old customs."

The Klingon scowled. "Between whom?"

Dallra's next words shook them. "Chevria and Heratt."

Picard let out a breath and leaned back slowly in his chair. "How is that to be arranged, cha'?" he asked, the chair creaked slightly as he shifted position and steepled his fingers in front of him.

"The challenge must be issued from the Enterprise by her. The call will be broadcast to the other leading clans, and they will arrange a meeting place for the confrontation."

Worf leaned towards the challai. "Am I to understand that this fight is for Chevria to... She is outmatched," he declared, and a grim expression settled on his face. "Captain, she cannot hope to win against Heratt."

"I tend to agree, Mr. Worf," said the Captain and directed his gaze to the Injaabii. "Cha', such a thing is - "

Dallra rose to his feet, and stepped up to Picard. Bowing low to the ground, he interrupted him. "Your Prime Directive is explicit, is it not, in decreeing that you may not interfere in the internal affairs of the worlds you visit?" Dallra paused in the telling, but they waited for him instead.

"Your point, cha'?" Riker asked sharply, when they saw he was not continuing.

"This may be regarded as such an internal affair. Retrieve Chevria, Captain, and issue the challenge before Heratt realises she is within his grasp."

"Surely the Enterprise's involvement will have to be viewed as a breach of the Prime Directive," Riker insisted, then went on, "The First is surely too unwell - "

"No, the Enterprise is merely the means for the message to be delivered." Dallra turned ice-cold eyes on the First Officer - the black of them grew deeper than jet, they were coal with red fire at the heart of them. "She will prevail." The challai stood firm in his resolve.

"That's as may be, cha'," responded Riker, "but my people have a proverb about the bearer of bad news and - " the Captain held up a hand to cut in.

"Even if we accept this as the unvarnished truth, cha'," said Picard reluctantly, "there are other considerations, not least of which is the safety of the diplomatic staff."

"I will intervene with N'Chal Tharini to ensure their safety, Captain," Dallra stated resolutely.

Picard briefly reviewed the problems they had. This whole business was complicated beyond belief, and a lesser man would have washed his hands of the entire affair long ago. He wished he had that option open to him. *This* would have to be seen through to the bitter end, whatever the consequence. If... One small word to stand between the social and biological destruction of an entire world and its people. *If* Chevria's trip into espionage had come off,

and she had some of the perfume; *if* the challenge was won by her - unlikely! - a whole series of maybes running off seemingly into infinity. He beat his fingers against the table top, and gave a gruff, "Very well, how do we go about this?"

"It must be precise, sir," Dallra replied. "The words are laid out in ancient law and must be abided to at all times. Retrieve Chevria and then the challenge can be issued for she must say the words to Heratt's face without intervention of challai."

"I see... " responded Picard. He patted his communicator. "Mr. O'Brien, can you lock onto Chevria's signal and beam her aboard?" He turned to Worf. "Escort her back to Sickbay, Lieutenant, and cha' may speak to her there while Dr. Crusher - " he shook his head - "makes sure she is fit enough for this... this *challenge*."

At these words, Worf and Dallra departed rapidly, leaving the Captain and his First Officer sitting at opposite ends of the table.

"Did Toreq take the bait, Number One?" inquired Picard humourlessly.

"Hook, line and sinker," the Commander responded. "It was a real piece of craftsmanship - Geordi is to be commended."

"I'll remember that, Number One. If... " he said.

Dallra stood at the big Klingon's side and watched the play of light that was the sparkle of the transporter resolve into the First of his sibling. At first he thought she had been unsuccessful in her search for the perfume until he noticed a tiny box in her hand.

Bowing to her as she stepped from the platform, he reached for her hands and grasped them with fervour. "Oh Light of the World," he intoned, "you were - "

"Yes," she hissed, and took in the imposing figure of Worf, and the bowed head of O'Brien at a glance. She shook the small box in anger. "This," she grated, "had better be enough for the physician Crusher to analyse, cha', or *you* will answer for the untimely disturbance."

"Madam!" cha' protested. Then more evenly he went on. "W'Chri Picard has agreed for you to call the challenge."

Chevria halted, stood stock still, her back rigid, and a long sougning noise issued from her. "Ahhh!" She swung about, and her eyes glittered with feverish anticipation. "When?"

Worf interceded. "Madam," he rumbled, looking down at her and wondering how the hell such a small person could possibly defeat a hulking brute like Heratt. "Please come with me to Sickbay."

He left with the Injaabii woman striding alongside him with supreme confidence. Worf felt her attitude was admirable, if a little misplaced, and when she addressed him, he became aware that his thoughts must have been easily readable in his face.

"You are not so certain of the outcome as I, are you, Worf, clan brother?"

Unsettled by the bald assessment of his feelings, the Klingon declined to answer, taking

refuge in silence. He walked on, then glanced briefly into her eyes, even though they were nearly hidden by the veils.

Dallra stepped between them. "First," he said, "the challenge must be - "

"Do not lecture me on the ways of our ancestors, cha'," Chevria snapped. "The way has been clear for many months." A very strange expression appeared fleetingly on her fiery features, then it was gone, almost as if it had been imagined; her face no more than a smooth calm mask. "For many months," she repeated, something underpinning her tone.

Beverly Crusher was hovering at the entrance of Sickbay when they arrived, and she fairly snatched the box from Chevria's hands in her eagerness to get to its contents. She also hustled the two Injaabii into the main consulting area, and in no uncertain terms ordered Chevria to place herself on a diagnostic table.

Crusher grunted faintly, a faint noise of disapproval. "Weeell... at least you're no worse," she said testily, and sniffed. The Doctor turned her attention to Worf. "Yes?" she asked; her irritation was blindingly obvious.

Wisely Worf decided to say nothing, just acknowledging her briefly before making his way back to the bridge.

"Worf," Crusher said suddenly, in a carefully abstracted manner, "I want to look at those scratches as soon as possible."

The Klingon halted. "Yes, Doctor." He continued on his way.

Crusher carefully opened the small box, and peered inside. "Hmmm..." She poked a finger in and sniffed at it cautiously. Then, looking up at the two Injaabii, she pursed her mouth and chewed thoughtfully at the inside of her cheeks. "How much of this stuff have you had access to?"

Chevria frowned. "Quite a reasonable amount, sister." She gazed shrewdly at the Doctor. "This is the problem, Crusher? It has been tampered with?"

Beverly tapped her insignia. "Dr. Bolton to Sickbay." Addressing Chevria, she said, "No... I don't think so. It looks and smells exactly the same as the stuff the Ferengi left with Commander Riker. Strange - I really expected it to be different somehow. Still, Jon Bolton'll discover whether I'm right or not."

The Doctor felt around in her capacious pockets for her ever present datapad. Finding it she ran a finger down the controls and made some amendments to the information. She shoved it back into the pocket as a man of medium height came through the entrance.

Dallra spoke to her. "Crusher physician, is Chevria able to issue the challenge or no?"

Crusher appeared startled at the question. "Yes - " for a moment she shared a look with Chevria, and then reached out her hand - "cha'."

Chevria took the hand, palm facing palm, removed it and swept it across her chest. "I will overcome Heratt, sister Crusher Beverly, I swear by my daughters." She jumped lightly from the table, and departed from Sickbay without a further word.



Dallra curved downwards, flowing lines and billowing robes, then he, too, was gone.

The Doctor sighed, and turned to the waiting toxicologist. "Here it is, Jon," she said. "I hope it's been worth the wait."

Bolton took the box from Crusher's hand and opened it. Raising it to his nose, the scientist sniffed deeply at the dark, pungent substance which resided in there. He thinned his mouth. "I'll get this to the labs straight away, Dr. Crusher."

"Any idea how long it'll be before you have a definitive report, Jon?" she asked.

Bolton ran a hand through thinning hair, and squinted at her. "If - " he stressed the word - "it proves to be similar to the substance we already have a sample of, the computer will have the results in less than a couple of hours. But - "

Crusher waved a hand. "But me no buts, Jon. A couple of hours is about all the time I can let you have now." She had a severe expression - the lines around mouth and nose had deepened with the distress, the constant pressure she had had to deal with for the last week. "Hell!" she exclaimed. Sighing with fatigue, Crusher leaned against the wall. "Do the best you can, Doctor."

The toxicologist gave her a listless smile that did not reach his baggy eyes; he could only give her arm a sympathetic squeeze. "We'll do our best, Beverly. Better than our best, if need be."

Crusher gave him an feeble answering smile of her own. "Knew I could rely on you, Jon."

Dr. Bolton left sickbay as well, and Crusher went back to her patients feeling, if not hopeful, then at least not quite so hopeless.

Tharini stepped down from the podium, and walked slowly around Data; she moved closer to him and peered closely into his yellow eyes. "Challai..." she mused in a low, breathy tone. "Interesting." Narrowing those green, green eyes, her pupils swollen to great dark circles, she reached for one of his hands.

Breaking her study of him, the N'Chal tipped her head to his female companions. "So... you are Human. At least *you* do not offend me like the... *traders* do." She smiled a slow deadly smile, the fangs gleamed white against the dusk of her skin. "Sit," she commanded.

Troi and Lelltorin obeyed hastily, taking up a seat on either side of the N'Chal, on the steps of the platform.

"What is it you wish, Lelltorin?" she asked bluntly.

Lelltorin took in a deep breath, thought carefully, thoroughly, before replying. "What's best for your people and mine, N'Chal," she said humbly.

Tharini laughed, a surprisingly deep sound. "And what, Lelltorin, Ambassador of Terra and Federation, is *best* for my people?"

Troi could feel the wariness emanating from Tharini in pulses; it was so difficult with the

Injaabii to tell what they were really feeling. All this strange mixture of emotion beating at her; Troi closed her dark eyes in an attempt to try to sort out what was truly going on. She could hear the Ambassador speaking as if from a great way off, and then she felt something else creeping into the turmoil around her, something she had not expected.

Data noticed the Counselor had become very alert, almost listening in her quality of stillness, and he accordingly turned up his hearing to a greater level of efficiency. The android turned on his heel slowly, trying to tune in the low-voiced conversations around them. Then he had it. "Ambassador," he said, quite calmly, quietly even, "there are Ferengi in the building now."

Lelltorin sprang to her feet with remarkable agility, and took hold of the N'Chal by the arms. "Did you hear that, Tharini? Those contemptible little cretins are about to make a move on you. What in all the names of the devil are you going to do?"

"Wait," Tharini said, and seated herself on the step. "The Goddess will prevail."

Lelltorin swore expressively, and at some length, not bothering to conceal her anger.

The N'Chal regarded the Human woman with almost contemptuous silence, and signalled to some of the other women in the room. "Find the intruders," she said simply, "and deal with them." She stopped, then continued. "Bring the ringleader of them to me."

They obeyed her command with speed and dispersed amongst the pillars rapidly, melting into the stonework.

A tiny quiver flickered over Lelltorin's face as she observed them go, and when Troi gave an involuntary gasp, turned to face Tharini. "What - ?"

"We are not so defenceless as you think, Lelltorin. The priestesses are well-grounded in the ways," the woman said, and eyed Troi with great interest, nearly as much as she had shown Data. "Are you empathic?" she asked, startling them all with the question and her insight.

"Yes," said Troi.

Tharini put out a hand and tilted Deanna's face carefully between sharp claws. "What race are you, sister?" she purred.

"I'm half Human/half Betazoid," the Counselor replied, wondering at the open speculation in the N'Chal's face.

"Fascinating..." She trailed off and turned her head towards a faint noise, one no-one but Data had yet detected. "They come," she announced, rising to her feet and stepping from the podium.

The thin white gown fluttered past them as she moved towards the women who had returned with a Ferengi captive, and she trod softly, cat-like, a tigress, up to them. Suddenly she snapped, "What does this one feel, Troi Counselor? Is he fearful?" Tharini swung round to face the Betazoid, bared her teeth again. "Treacherous?"

Troi swallowed before that seeking, driven look. "Yes... N'Chal." She could see the woman waited for more. "Both," she said earnestly.

"Good. He will serve my purpose well then." So saying the N'Chal gestured to a woman who had stood behind her, and received a weapon from the other's hands, ignoring the bowed head.

My God, thought Troi with horror, *she's going to dispatch him here. Now!* The Counselor dropped her head, turning it from the sight, the spectacle she was sure, certain, she was about to witness.

Lelltorin intervened subtly, drawing the N'Chal's anger to her and away from the hapless Ferengi. "Doubtless he deserves this death, Madam," she said, "but revenge sought on a single prisoner will never satisfy the people. Better still to direct your anger in a constructive way - " the Ambassador leaned closer, almost, but not quite, touching the N'Chal in an effort to transmit her idea - "and remove them and their ilk from the world forever."

Tharini stayed her hand, but kept the small sharp stiletto-like knife close to the Ferengi's throat. His pulse could be seen to beat rapidly through the cords which stood out along his neck from the forced unnatural position it was being held in. "Talk, Ambassador, is all this is. Talk is all the challai do... " Green eyes grew wide suddenly as something occurred to her, and nostrils flaring, Tharini's knife hand dropped, and she hissed, laughing. "You are all challai." It was a statement, and she shook her head with the novelty of the idea.

Data stepped forward and started to speak, but was interrupted by an Injaabii woman who approached the N'Chal and whispered in her ear. Tharini waved her away. "My birth sibling has issued challenge against Heratt," she said, and marched away from the others to reseal herself on the platform.

Data frowned slightly, and directed a bemused look at the Ambassador, who faced Tharini and bowed deeply. He followed her lead when the woman on the platform turned her face away from them, closing her eyes.

"The audience is at an end," Lelltorin explained.

"I see," the android replied, and asked, "is it permitted for us to leave - ?"

"Data," responded the Ambassador quickly, quietly, "it is imperative that we retire. Immediately."

Data gave a brief acknowledgement, and touched his combadge. "Three to beam up, Chief O'Brien."

Dr. Crusher took a long steady look at the results which Jon Bolton had thrown on her table not more than thirty seconds ago, and bit her bottom lip. "Exactly the same?" she said.

The toxicologist gave a curt nod. He sat in the chair which faced her from the other side of her desk, and picked up the cup of lukewarm coffee he had carried in with him. Taking a sip, he pulled a slight face as he remembered it was not at its best. He put it down. "Exactly," he echoed, his tone carefully devoid of any emotional content.

Crusher rubbed her eyes. "More coffee?" she asked as she went to the food slot. At his affirmative gesture, she gave a sudden little snort of laughter - strangely out of place with her feelings - then carried the cups back to the table.

"Beverly?" he asked, not certain what she found so amusing at a time like this.

"I'm sorry, Jon. Something occurred to me as being... well, slightly ironic. Here we are attempting to solve a substance addiction, and we're relying on an addiction of our own to keep us awake." She stared deeply into the swirling depths of the cups.

"Ah," he said in understanding. "Caffeine."

"Yeah, caffeine." Nevertheless, Crusher took a good swallow of the dark, bitter substance as if it had restorative, as well as recuperative, powers. "Have we got a hypothesis, Jon, about this stuff?" She indicated the report and the small remaining sample of perfume.

"It's inert," he replied. "The chemical property is simple. Mostly water, some oil, and the perfume extract. Now, that's fairly intriguing, Doctor, the actual perfume. There are only three parts per million in the samples we took, and as such I would have thought the solution to be so weak as to have no effect at all."

Crusher nodded in agreement. "So would I."

They both regarded the report gloomily.

"How *does* it interact with the Tretharian?" mused Crusher aloud, and flicked through the information again, searching for a clue, for anything at all.

The interruption was quietly made, a soft voice intruding in their thoughts. "Doctor, would you please take a look at Lerdast." A male nurse stood in the doorway of the office with concern registering on his face.

Crusher followed him through the main area to a side ward. She took in the faltering readings at a glance, and cursed expressively.

Jon Bolton stood on the threshold of the ward with a pitying look for the young female who lay gasping out her life as the poison finally took its toll. Slowly, the vital signs levelled off, creeping down the panel.

Bitterly, Crusher said, "One down, five to go. Chrissake, what the hell is the matter with these people?!"

Bolton took a look at the warm cadaver on the table. "Perhaps, Beverly, in her death Lerdast will bring her people new hope. There is always the autopsy." He trailed off and put a hand on her forearm. He could understand the Doctor's frustration about losing a patient, identify with it even - it was the hardest thing any physician ever had to face. Death was always the winner in the end.

Abstracted, Crusher patted the well-intentioned hand, and thought hard. Sensing her inattention, Bolton asked, "What is it, Bev?"

Crusher faced him. "Don't know, Jon. But I've just had an idea." She bit her lip again, and chewed for a second. "Computer," she said, "please give all valid information regarding the use of homeopathic medicine." The Doctor addressed the toxicologist with a bright light in her eyes which had not been there previously. "The clue, Jon, is in the amount of the substance - the active ingredient. I'll put my reputation on the line, if it's not - but I just know..." she trailed off.

Dr. Bolton managed to appear puzzled, thin lines creased his forehead and drew his heavy brows together. "Homeopathy is not practised - "

"Shhh!" Crusher listened to the computer as it reeled off in its mellifluous voice the information she requested. "Stop," she commanded. "Reiterate strengths required to treat histomonic reactions." As it went back over the information, Crusher gave a triumphant smile to Bolton, and clapped him on the arm in pleasure. "I think we've got something, Jon."

"So do I," he said, and returned the smile thankfully.

"I'll just run the postmortem and pass the results through the computer to be sure - but yup, I think it'll be okay." Crusher felt better than she had done for days; even the tiredness was swept under a metaphorical carpet for the time being. She touched her insignia. "Crusher to Picard."

"Doctor?"

"Good news - no, *great* news, Captain. We think we've got a link on the effects of the poison on the Injaabii, and we're just about to run a few - "

"How long, Beverly?" Picard's voice requested, cutting into her dialogue.

"Couple of hours?"

"Make it so, Doctor," Picard said, his voice short, and he was gone.

Crusher turned to the toxicologist. "You heard him. Let's get started."

Picard sat in the command chair feeling out of control. He was not a happy man, and it translated itself into fidgeting and pulling at his uniform. "Number One, when did Ambassador Lelltorin indicate she would be joining us?"

Riker could tell his Captain's sangfroid was seriously rattled - every line of Picard's body showed the tension they all felt - and answered as soothingly as possible. "Twenty minutes, sir."

The Captain stared at the viewscreen and scowled. Waiting for something to happen was normally his strong suit. Everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Ambassador, Counselor Troi, Chevría and cha' Dallra walked out of the turbolift.

Picard nodded curtly in acknowledgement and went to the observation lounge. His senior officers followed after him and the little contingency of Injaabii and the Ambassador.

The Captain did not waste time. "Are you ready, Madam?" he asked Chevría.

She, for her part, was almost glacial in her calm. The burning emotions which had been so torchlike were held carefully in check, and she was distant too - almost in a meditative trance. Chevría did not answer the Captain's question, but Dallra moved in front of her smoothly. "The First is prepared," he intoned, and swept obeisance to Picard, and to the others who stood and watched.

Lelltorin tilted her silver head and regarded Picard with unreadable, deep eyes. "Are you

ready, Captain?" she whispered the question to him.

He shook his head. "You know me better than that, Fliss," he said. He met her gaze evenly, but she could see the distaste he had for this task reflected in the depth of his own regard. "If there were any other way -"

"But there is not, and we must cannot delay," cha' Dallra said.

"Will she not require -" Worf began, but was cut off imperiously by the Ambassador with a killing look.

"You will stand so," explained Dallra, and indicated with a drawn dagger the places the staff needed to take. "You will keep your backs turned at all times; you must not witness the Surajh's disgrace for else your lives will also be forfeit."

They all filed back through to the bridge and turned their backs; all feeling idiotic, helpless, useless even. Worf was the only one excepted from the ruling - but briefly - and that only because he had to operate the communications channel. Then he, too, turned his back and joined his Captain and colleagues in the places Dallra had so carefully drawn up for them.

They each heard Dallra hissing words in the old language of the people; heard him spitting out more guttural commandments than they had ever heard his quietly spoken brethren use before. Heratt's deeper tones added to the melee of sound, and then a new voice stepped in. A much lighter voice, a rigidly controlled mezzo-soprano, and those tones rose above the others to a shout. Almost.

Chevria cried in Standard, "It is my right, and I claim it in front of those who would be my brethren. I claim the Blood Challenge, Heratt, and be done with it!"

There was a long snarl of cold rage, and then, "So be it."

"You may turn," said Dallra simply, and so they did.

Chevria stood proudly erect in the centre of the bridge, and they saw she had cut the hair from her head and left it in a golden puddle around her feet. As they watched, she stripped away the long robes of her clan and left them, too, lying in an abandoned heap on the floor of the bridge.

"I leave the clan of my own free-will," she stated, and looked around the room at each of those present, lingering longest and most intensely on Lelltorin. Bending, she tore the cloth with her claws, and broke the chains of marriage. "It is done."

Lelltorin stepped forward, and bowed deeply from her waist, with enormous respect - the only time any had seen her use such a precise means of expression. "Gahr't' loelrl'ath, Chevria." The Ambassador turned to Picard. "The N'Chal must be informed it is done, Jean-Luc."

"Mr. Worf," said he, without taking his eyes from Lelltorin's.

"Aye, sir," the Klingon replied, and bent to his task.

The face of N'Chal Tharini filled the screen, and she stared at her birth sibling with narrow, green eyes. "So, sister," she said, and the term was not an endearment. "The challenge will be in the ancient arena." Her gaze circled the bridge. "Bring those of your new clan -" she

bared her teeth to the roots - "bring all those. They are challai, are they not." It was not a question, and it seemed to startle Dallra considerably.

He regained his composure swiftly. "N'Chal," he said.

Tharini's eyes grew hotter as she gazed on him, but she spoke not a word and closed the communication.

The deep silence was broken by Data, who breathed out one word. "Intriguing."

Picard stopped holding his breath himself, and released it in a rush. He stepped to the centre chair and sat firmly in it. "Ambassador?"

"Soon, Captain," she replied. She supported Chevria as the woman sagged slightly from the effort of maintaining her hard-won control. Troi went to the Injaabii woman's other side and they helped her from the room.

Worf growled. "If the fate of all of us is in her hands, sir, I do not believe we will be at peace for much longer."

"I hope, for all our sakes, Lieutenant - " Picard spoke so softly that they almost did not hear him - "that you will prove to be wrong."

The arena sat on the horizon like a squat toad, an ugly grey thing with no beauty to it. It was purely functional, completely utilitarian in design. Though many things have the tag of functional they may yet retain some vestige of beauty, but this did not, would never have had; it was as though no-one had wasted more time than was possibly needed on aesthetics, as if they had not wanted to. It was what it was - a killing ground. And yet, around it grew the poppies of Injaab in abundance, filling the air with their scent and the bright reflection of their petals in the height of the sun. Gross ugliness and remarkable loveliness side by side - but both were capable of death, and that spectre hovered unseen like a pall over the land.

Into this place six columns of light sparkled into existence and solidified into recognisable forms. As if this had been a trigger, from the arena strode a heavily veiled woman, dressed from head to foot in purple - the colour of blood. She came to a halt in front of Chevria and held out a hand. In the hand was a sword of flawless steel, the blade a two-edged thing which flashed silver and blue in the light of the sun - each cutting edge engraved with the runic letters of the Injaabii language spelling out in detail the fate of all those who might wield such a weapon but fail. Time would tell whether Chevria would be remembered for her achievement in the songs of her people, or as another engraved rune on the blade.

Chevria accepted the sword, and the tip wavered to drop agonisingly slowly in a salute to the N'Chal of Injaab, and she bowed her shorn head.

Tharini tipped her head back, and bayed like a hound on the scent, a wolf to the moon. Her fangs exposed themselves fully, and she swivelled and marched to the entrance of the field of conflict. At the first ripple of her howl, Heratt came forward to the entrance also; he was bared to the elements and he carried the mate of the sword which Chevria had in hand.

"We will begin," snarled the N'Chal, and surrounded by her priestesses, she made way for the protagonists. "Be seated, Humans, and watch."

The party accompanying Chevria obeyed Tharini and spread themselves in a thin circle to oversee the challenge. From their vantage point could be seen those whom Heratt considered to be indispensable to him; to his pride perhaps?

Troi shifted uncomfortably, the flames of alien emotions she could not - did not want to - understand licking at her relentlessly. She shuddered and Riker saw the shiver and stepped closer to her as surreptitiously as possible. "Bill," she murmured, "I know that one of them will not walk away from this place alive." Dark eyes met his, horror stirring in their depths. "I don't want to be here."

"Nor," responded the First Officer quietly, "I think, do any of us. Circumstance has dictated our presence, Deanna." He gave her a humourless smile. "We'd better make the best of it."

Picard and Lel'torin stood close together, and Worf was a little behind them. All three wore particularly forbidding, utterly resolute expressions as they took heed of the events as they started to unfold on the field below them.

Chevria hefted the sword experimentally, swung it in a long crescent slowly; it whispered as it cut the air. Backhand first, forehand, then chop, a careful assessment of an unfamiliar weapon, a cautious drill. It was a lighter instrument of death than that which the Surajh carried, and satisfied at last, Chevria crouched and waited.

Heratt lunged for his ex-mate, the heavy sword hissing through the air, and Chevria met the blow, parrying it and sliding it off the length of the blade in her hand. She sprang away on light feet, her clawed toes giving her purchase on the sandy surface.

She leapt in and slashed forehanded at Heratt's leading arm, but he twisted and avoided the blow by a breath. He returned the blow, swinging viciously, the muscles of his arm bulging, and again Chevria parried the blow.

Recoiling, she circled warily, her eyes never leaving his face as she adjusted her grip slightly, wrapping her fingers more tightly about the hilt. Then she darted in again behind him, moving under his guard to hack at a hamstring, and the blade bit deep into flesh. First blood.

An involuntary cry escaped the Surajh's lips, and the thin mouth drew back in a grimace from great eye-teeth. He lurched away from her, taking a gasp of air, and snarled his rage and fury at her. Then he struck a mighty forehand at her before she could escape his intent, and the sound of the blades striking rang out in the stillness like a death knell. Sparks flew along the edges as they met and slid down towards the hilts.

Worf, from his vantage point, growled in anger. He was certain the Surajh had her now; the man's superior strength would surely tell? It *had* to tell! He made a move forward, but Picard laid a hand on his forearm, shaking his head.

"Lieutenant."

The Captain's voice was firm, and the Klingon heeded his command, settling for rigidity in his pose. He was then aware of the affront in the Captain, and felt better understanding because he could see it reflected in his fellow officers and the Ambassador. Such outrage!

The wound Chevria had dealt Heratt was superficial - it had bled copiously at first, but now it did not seem to be hindering him. Swiftly he moved in to the woman, pushing her



backwards relentlessly, but Chevria slapped her free hand across the Surajh's eyes with claws extended and raked them down his face, disengaging the blade as she did so.

"Trickery!" he howled. "A foul!" But when no sound came from Tharini he dashed the beads of blood from his face with a wrist, and charged in like a maddened bull. He smashed his sword down with all his force, and his reward was to see Chevria stagger under the assault. Sheer brute strength was what he understood best, and he made the best of that which he had in plenty.

For long seconds it seemed that she, for all her surprising skill, was beaten, but drawing on reserves from somewhere, Chevria scrambled away from the evilly slashing blade of her opponent, parrying blow after blow. A thin line of blood showed on the gold of her skin where he had caught her a glancing blow.

From foot to foot, the woman restlessly bounced as she weighed him, and knew her only chance was to wear him out. He had the advantage of strength and reach, while she was quicker, lighter, and was infinitely brighter. She fought for all the best reasons, and he only for himself.

The dust churned up into thin clouds around their feet as they hacked at one another and cut and slashed. Blow, parry. Weariness crept into them, and Chevria trembled with the effort to keep on. He would make a mistake, and that would be fatal, but then, so might she... and it must not - *could* not - come to that.

At last, he made an error, and an opening presented itself to her. Chevria shifted her weight, presenting herself sideways and leaped forward as Heratt moved in for an easy kill. She pushed mightily, the point of the sword entered his body between his ribs and drove deeply inwards to his vital organs. Then Chevria pulled it outwards again, and a great gush of purple blossomed to fall like rain on the parched dust of the ground.

Raging still, the man crumpled to his knees, the sword sinking to the ground in front of him. Tawny-gold eyes mocked her even though they were dying, and he coughed once, belching out yet more blood and gore, fountaining to splatter her feet. The Surajh's corpse folded slowly, and came to rest, head on knees, to slip inexorably sideways.

Standing over him, Chevria paused and bent, putting sweat drenched fingers to the blood on the rapidly cooling corpse. She touched them to her lips, licking it from them, then hurled the sword away. Throwing her head back, she cried out, "It is done. No man may hold me, or mine. The clan is free."

N'Chal Tharini nodded once and turned her back, leaving the way she had come, her retinue of women behind her.

Cha' Dallra approached Chevria first as soon as the N'Chal was out of sight. The Enterprise personnel were uncertain, and waited for an indication they could move. Ambassador Lelltora came and stood beside Dallra, reaching out a hand to him. He took it and using his foot turned the cadaver of the late Surajh to lie face upwards. An insect buzzed and landed, crept its way across the sightless eyes.

Dallra cleared his throat and spat, then turned on his heel and led the Ambassador back to Picard and the others. Then they all watched Chevria as she got to her knees and cut Heratt's hair from him. Rising, she twisted it around her fingers knotting it into a thong of sorts, and tucked it into the belt at her waist.

Picard faced her. "What now, Chevria?"

"Now," she whispered, "we find out if Crusher Beverly has been as successful as I." She leaned on Lelltorin, who accepted the charge with equanimity.

Beverly Crusher was waiting for them when they appeared in Sickbay, and she tutted loudly over the cut Chevria had sustained in her fight with Heratt. It looked decidedly more serious than it really was, and the Doctor soon had it cleaned and drawn together.

As the Captain and his senior officers turned to take their leave, she snapped in no uncertain terms, "Worf!"

The Klingon halted and ground his teeth. "I'm fine, Doctor."

"Reeally," said Crusher, her eyes flashing with temper. "You're a Doctor now, are you?"

"No..." responded Worf doubtfully, and took a place on a seat as she examined his face none too gently.

"Glad to hear it," she said testily. "This - " she dabbed the raw lines Thiver's claws had left with an astringent - "will sting a little. Can't have you getting an infection, now, can we?"

Worf ignored the sarcastic tone, and tried not to show that the astringent did more than sting - it set his face afire. He scowled and flicked her a glance which should have resulted in her being a greasy patch on the floor. "May I go?" he inquired impatiently. He realised the Doctor was taking her temper out on him because she was unable as yet to release it in a more constructive manner - that still did not mean he had to like it though.

Crusher ran her tricorder over the cuts, nodded brusquely and waved him out. "Yes, go," she said tartly, and promptly dismissed him from her mind.

Setting her fists into the hollow of her waist, the Doctor approached the Injaabii woman again and began preparing herself for a tirade on the foolhardiness, the idiocy, bloodmindedness, and whatever else she could think of fling at her patient.

Chevria saw the beginnings of the speech gathering on the Human's tongue, then totally disarmed Crusher by saying, "I feel most odd, Crusher Beverly."

All thoughts of chastisement fled from Beverly's mind as she settled Chevria on the diagnostic bed. The readings the panel gave out were not good, and Crusher patted her insignia. "Dr. Bolton, how's that antidote coming along?"

"The computer models are reacting fairly predictably," Bolton's voice replied, "but the first batch is a long way off being ready, Beverly."

"How long?"

There was the sound of mumbling as the toxicologist consulted somebody. Then, "Three refinements, at least."

"Not good enough, Jon. I need some yesterday." Crusher stared grimly at the panel, biting her bottom lip. *At this rate, she thought, I'll have chewed through it soon. Won't something give*

us a break? She went on, "We can't wait, Jon. You'd better bring what you've got to Sickbay."

She heard a slight noise - one of somebody sighing faintly - then he responded reluctantly, "On my way, Beverly. Bolton out."

Crusher turned to Chevria and examined the woman again, tipped her head to one side and made a helpless shrug. "You heard," she said.

The Injaabii smiled. A real smile, one with warmth in it, and the emerald eyes were warm too. "Beverly," she said, "truly, you are a sister to me and mine, and this is no great thing you ask of me. I risked more than my life in the challenge, so by comparison..." She shook her head in wonderment, looked into worried blue eyes, and took the hand which rested by her side on the bed, wrapping her fingers around the palm. "Do what you must, Beverly."

The Doctor's mouth twisted in an attempt to reply to the trust being placed in her, but the worry did not leave her eyes, and when Bolton walked into Sickbay he found her still holding Chevria's hand.

Crusher turned at the sound of his approach and took the small vial of clear liquid from him. She held it to the light for a second or two, and tilted it. Cocking an eyebrow at the other scientist, she took a hypospray, adjusted it and put the antidote in it. Then she held it against Chevria's arm and the stuff hissed into the woman's circulation. "Here goes nothing," she breathed, and waited - what for, she did not know.

Aside, to Bolton, she asked, "How do the computer models react?"

"They don't, at first," he said, and hemmed quietly.

Crusher's eyes widened slightly. "Tell me more, Jon."

"Well," he replied discomforted. "No discernible reaction at first, as I've just said, and then they go through a stage of getting worse, then better." Bolton hesitated. "But that's only on models, Doctor, not the real thing. And the antidote is still untried, as well as not being completely pure."

Crusher folded her arms and stared at Chevria, who seemed to be sleeping. "How quickly do they start to react?"

"After about twenty minutes."

"Will she need restraining?"

The toxicologist drew his brows together in a frown, and pursed his mouth. "No. There was no indication of violent reaction to the antidote." Something flickered over his face and was gone. "But it might be safer if you were to isolate her."

Crusher nodded. "Just what I was thinking, Jon."

They had Chevria moved to an isolation unit where Crusher could keep a close eye on her patient, and set about making the Injaabii woman as comfortable as possible.

A last look around the room convinced Crusher they had taken the right steps. Chevria was right; she truly had nothing to lose from the experiment, and everything to gain.

She settled down to wait, to see what effect the antidote would have. They would probably be the longest minutes of her life.

Captain's Log. Stardate 48956.4.: Dr. Crusher has reported the antidote to the poison is working well. Chevria is showing signs of returning to normal, which means, I gather, that the whole of Sickbay is walking on tenterhooks.

It seems the poison was an after-effect created by the Injaabii susceptibility to any foreign substance they come into contact with. Such was the reaction of their bodies to the perfume supplied by the Ferengi, particularly in conjunction with the Tretharian in its altered state, that they were in fact poisoning themselves unwittingly.

I am of the opinion this had not escaped Toreq, and that he used the situation to further his own ends. However, I also believe he is going to be in for a very nasty surprise in the not too distant future.

The N'Chal is in direct communication with Ambassador Lelltorin at the Embassy. All else seems to be in hand.

Picard signed off his log entry and picked up the old edition of Chaucer he had set on the table face down. Propping his leg on the top of his desk he began to reread the Miller's Tale. He was very fond of Chaucer, irreverently bawdy, and it amused him greatly. He chuckled out loud at a passage, and was still chuckling when the door twittered loudly.

"Come," Picard called, and turned a page. He slowly became aware of being scrutinized, and looking up he saw Beverly Crusher gazing at him with a very odd expression on her face. "Doctor?" he asked rather formally.

Crusher played for time. "What are you reading?" she inquired, and peered closely at the cover of the book. "Oh, Chaucer." She fiddled with the articles in her jacket pockets.

"Mmm, Chaucer," he agreed and reluctantly set the book to one side. "How can I help you, Beverly?" He gave a mental sigh. *I might actually get a chance to finish something soon.*

Crusher perched herself on the edge of the desk, and rested her head on one side. "Have you made a report about the Ferengi involvement?"

The Captain tipped his head and raised an eyebrow. "The real reason, Beverly."

Beverly's mouth twitched ruefully. "Can't I get anything past you, Jean-Luc?"

"I rather think I know you too well, Beverly," the Captain responded with a corresponding lift to his own mouth.

"Well," she said, and eased herself from her precarious seat to plonk down in the chair opposite him. She started again. "To be honest, Captain, it's Chevria."

"Why doesn't that surprise me, Doctor?" Picard replied, and settled back in his chair. "Please, do go on."

"She's depressed," the Doctor stated baldly.

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Crusher went on. "Quite badly. It seems she feels she's served her purpose and now doesn't know where she fits into her society."

"Has Counselor Troi spoken to her?" Picard asked. This was all he needed!

"Yeesss - " The Doctor flicked her hair over her shoulder. "Not that simple. I wish it was."

Picard frowned, and ran a fingertip across the table top, feeling the slick smoothness but not really registering it. "Explain, please."

The Doctor stood up and wandered over to the fish tank; she watched the occupants swimming around their coral reef for a while before replying. Over her shoulder, she said, "No husband, no clan. None of those, no purpose. No reason for her to be." She turned around and grimaced at the Captain. "Hell, I don't understand the mind-set of these people at all, Jean-Luc. Dammit, she wanted to be rid of Heratt and *now*!" Crusher waved her hands in disgust. "*Now*," she repeated, "she's in mourning - or at least what I understand is mourning... of a sort. I think!"

The Captain propped his head on the knuckles of one hand, closed his eyes and sighed volubly. Opening them, he replied, "Have either cha' Dallra or Lakri been able to give a reason for her depression?"

The Doctor waved her hands some more, and made a derisive noise. "Not one I can understand nor, for that matter, any of my staff. None of the psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, not even the bloody ship's vet for Chrissake!"

Picard regarded his Chief Medical Officer with a certain amount of sympathy. It had been an immensely trying time for them all, but perhaps most of all for the medical and scientific departments of the ship. He could only acknowledge the fine job they had all done in finding the reason for the Injaab illness, and of course, the antidote; but commendations were not always adequate thanks. No, he seriously felt what the good Doctor required as thanks was the total, uncompromising recovery of her patients, and *nothing* less would do. It was an attitude he could readily admire - it also seemed this was not going to come off, unless something could be sorted out about Chevria.

As he thought, Crusher flopped wearily into the chair again and regarded him with concerned eyes. "Jean-Luc?" she said helplessly.

Just as he opened his mouth, the First Officer's voice sounded in the room. "Picard to the bridge."

He flicked a look over to the Doctor and replied, "On my way, Number One."

As they walked through the doors onto the bridge, Worf spoke. "Sir, an incoming message from the Ferengi."

Picard headed for the command chair and settled himself. "Let's see them, Mr. Worf."

A face none of them could claim familiarity with appeared a few seconds later in

response to this request, and Riker sat forward in his chair with his head tilted at a slight angle which denoted great interest. He raised his brows and looked at Worf behind him. They shared an insufferably smug expression which they quickly schooled into impassivity. No telling how much *this* Ferengi knew of Human or Klingon kinesics.

Picard also angled his head, then with exquisite manners enquired, "Daimon?"

The Ferengi was a younger individual than Toreq, and as he had displaced Toreq, it also seemed the two who had always been alongside that one were gone too. He smiled a carnivore's smile. "I am Rorg. I am Daimon in Toreq's place, Picard."

"Oh," replied Picard without much interest. "I trust he is - "

The new Daimon leaned into the viewer on his ship and glared belligerently at the Captain. "What do you know, Human, of the N'Chal's decision to close the Injaabii trade routes to us?"

Picard's face acquired polite interest. "Cessation of the trade of Tretharian, Daimon? How very unfortunate for you."

"You did not know of this?" Rorg asked suspiciously; he was mindful of the trade they had done under Toreq with this Human - was it worth anything?

"News to us," responded Riker evenly.

The Daimon gazed at the First Officer. "I do not trust you, Picard - " he turned unblinking lizard eyes on the Captain - "and do not see any reason for that to change. Do you?"

"Daimon Rorg," Picard responded smoothly, "you may feel free to trust or not. If that's your will, then so be it." The Captain raised his shoulders eloquently.

Rorg flipped his tongue around his mouth and teeth. "It has something to do with the Injaabii female aboard the Enterprise."

Picard's eyes flickered for a moment. This one was surprisingly astute for a Ferengi, and he wondered briefly if there would be any problem in the final resolution. He dismissed the thought almost as soon as it entered his head as ridiculous. "What female?"

Rorg was caught between a rock and a hard place. How could he admit to the Human Captain *how* he knew of Chevria without divulging too much of what Ferengi policy had been... *was*... and still keep him unaware of the duplicity involved? He opted for covering his tracks, blustered and dodged the question. "I will be taking this to a higher authority than mine, Picard. You may rest assured the Federation has not heard the last of this insult to the Protectorate."

The viewscreen flipped once again, and Worf reported, "They have ceased their communications, Captain."

"How d'you like that?" Riker shook his head with mock disgust. "Not so much as a kiss my - "

"Commander!" Picard said softly in remonstrance, but allowed them to see a smile tug at his lips. "I gather the 'weapon' will fall to pieces as soon as they start to try to make any sort of

analysis."

Riker's mouth stretched into a grin, and behind them they heard a rumble of amusement from Worf. "Yessir," Picard's First Officer replied, "I can absolutely guarantee it."

Their self-congratulatory, self-satisfied manner was cut short abruptly by an acid voice remarking, "So, gentlemen, all's well that ends well, is it?" Crusher smouldered at the Captain and her fellow officers, favouring even the innocent Data with a frosty stare.

Managing to appear guilty, the Captain restrained his good humour. "Beverly," he said serenely. "Perhaps Ambassador Lelltorin -"

"She's not here, is she?" The Doctor's mouth was a hard line.

"True," agreed Picard. "But if you'd like to wait, Doctor, I'm certain Worf will be able to get in contact with her."

"Fine," the Doctor replied, in no mood for placation. "Call me when *you* manage to get hold of her! I -" she paused for effect - "will be in Sickbay." Crusher stamped up the ramp to the turbolift, aware of four pairs of eyes brazenly watching her exit and of others who were more covert in their appraisal.

"In the light of the urgency Dr. Crusher is expressing, Mr. Worf -" Picard coughed to clear his throat - "perhaps you should exhibit some alacrity in communicating with the Ambassador."

Worf, who was still regarding the shut lift doors very thoughtfully, turned his attention back to his Captain. "Aye, sir," he said, and set to work with a will.

The Klingon had not been searching for the Ambassador too long before the Embassy responded to the Enterprise. "Sir," the Security Chief rumbled, and obeyed his Captain when Picard indicated the message should go onto the viewscreen.

It was not Lelltorin who stood before them, but a Human male who was a stranger. The stocky individual introduced himself. "Captain Picard, I am Secretary Deepak Singh Pall."

"You have me at a disadvantage, Secretary Pall," replied the Captain. He waited for the Indian to go on.

Pall bowed his head. "Sir, Ambassador Lelltorin is with the N'Chal and is unlikely to return to the Embassy before the small hours." He raised his head, and offered, "If I can be of assistance to you in any way?"

Picard shook his head regretfully. "Secretary Pall, this is only something the Ambassador could deal with..." He trailed off and thought for a second. "Can you contact either cha' Dallra or Lakri?"

The Secretary stroked his neat black beard and frowned very slightly. "I do not think it will be impossible, Captain, but it may take some time." Pall shrugged regretfully. "It is difficult for a male of such lowly social status -" he gave them a wry smile - "as I to be heard on Injaab." He brightened suddenly as a new thought occurred to him. "Please, Captain, leave this in my hands. I will have the Ambassador here to talk to you very shortly."

"Thank you, Secretary," said Picard, and gestured to Worf to cut the communication.

"Now what?" asked Riker, leaning forward and putting his elbows on his knees.

Picard huffed out a breath, and gazed at his First. "More waiting, Number One, while we see if Secretary Pall is as good as his word."

Pall *was* as good as his word - indeed, better. The man was nothing short of a miracle worker as in less than one hour Worf announced there was an incoming message from the Federation Embassy and that it carried the code of the Ambassador.

"Well, don't keep the lady waiting, Worf," said Riker, "put her on screen." He tapped his combadge. "Captain, Ambassador Lelltorin is waiting to speak to you."

Picard appeared on the bridge and moved to stand behind the ops consoles where he rested his hand on the back of Data's chair. The ensign who sat there shifted forward slightly. "Fliss," the Captain said, "we have need of your expertise."

Lelltorin gave Picard a thin little smile, and folded her arms. "Do tell, Jean-Luc." She raised a finger, which forestalled any comment he had been about to make. "Chevria," she announced, and nodded sagely at the Captain's expression. "Thought so." She sniffed and then sighed. "Think you could stand a visitor for a few hours, Captain?" The generous mouth quirked at Picard in a subtle message.

Picard smiled back. "It's possible, Ambassador."

"Good. Beam me aboard now."

The screen went blank for a second and as its view returned to normal, Picard touched his insignia gently. "Transporter room three get ready to beam Ambassador Lelltorin aboard."

"Acknowledged, sir," said a disembodied female voice.

"Number One," said Picard, "if you will join me?"

"Aye, sir," replied Riker and joined his Captain beside the lift. "The bridge is yours, Lt. Worf."

Lelltorin stepped into Sickbay with the First Officer and Picard behind her. She headed briskly to the side ward where she knew Chevria was lying; her robes billowed as she moved, and the Ambassador tossed the veil to Riker, who caught it with a bemused air.

"Wait here, Will," commanded Picard, and followed Lelltorin through into the room.

Chevria lay on her side, staring at the walls with their banks of monitors; her eyes were hidden beneath a thin hand - both Picard and the Ambassador were considerably shocked at the extensive loss of weight the woman seemed to have sustained in so few days. The synthesised stuff of the sickbay gown hung on her form.

Lelltorin made an exclamation of dismay, and moved to the head of the bed, taking Chevria's hand in her own. "What in God's name are you playing at, Chevria?" she asked; her tone was not sympathetic, but sharp, demanding even.

The Injaabii woman did not respond, but turned her head away to show a sharply pointed ear set high on her head.

The Ambassador pursed her mouth, and gripped Chevria's shoulders ruthlessly pushing her back down hard into the mattress of the bed. Lelltorin's eyes blazed like black fire, and she hissed at Chevria, "I thought better of you, *sister*. To give up so soon, when you have the whole of your life before you."

Stung, the other woman opened her eyes and returned the furious and fiery gaze of the Ambassador for a second, then a nameless despair crept into them again, and she grew still. "I have not *given* up, Lelltorin sister." The green eyes opened again, pain and self-doubt shadowing them. "But what purpose have I now - ?"

Lelltorin snorted in disgust, interrupting her words. "This is not the way the people behaved a couple of centuries ago. Has Injaabii society stagnated to such an extent that they can't see a good thing when it's in front of them?" Lelltorin lifted her hands from the tense shoulders, and took a step back. She was unaware, as was Chevria, that they had acquired spectators who quietly stood and waited.

The Ambassador stabbed a finger at Chevria to punctuate her words. "If there is no room for you in *your* society, why should you limit yourself?" Lelltorin put her face very close to the alien woman. "You can be whatever you want to be, Chevria. The only limit is your ability." Lelltorin stood very still, and shuttered her face. "So - is this display an indication that you believe you are incapable of more than bearing female children for a fool?"

Chevria's nostrils flared, and Crusher turned to Picard. "That's more than I've been able to do in a week, Jean-Luc, dammit!"

Picard flicked a glance at the Doctor. Certainly the Ambassador was using recognised, if somewhat provocative, methods, but he did ask himself why Fliss had got a result and not Beverly. He would have to ask the Ambassador why it was. He put a forefinger to his lips, a gesture she obeyed with astonishing speed. He could see why too! Chevria had hauled herself into a sitting position and was swearing at the Ambassador in High Injaabii - it sounded spectacular.

Chevria swung her legs over the side of the bed and took a step towards Lelltorin, who moved easily out of her way, and as the alien female stumbled, reached out her arms and caught her.

"Lelltorin Felicity," she rasped, and hung on for dear life. Chevria's emotions tore through her and her muscles quivered in the attempt to govern them from erupting. Under tight control once more, she raised her head, green-in-green eyes, slits of pupils expanded to round circles. "I want... I..." She faltered for a second. Then her voice grew stronger. "I *want*, Lelltorin Felicity, what *you* have." The great fierce eyes slitted, the third eyelid flashed across their surface. "To be... challai! Equal! As all of you are."

Lelltorin gave Chevria a thin smile, and grasped her upper arms tightly, so tightly that the watchers could see the Ambassador's fingers whiten to the bone. "Who," asked she, "will stop you, my friend?"

Chevria bared her fangs. "N'Chal - "

Lelltorin scoffed at her. "What rights does that one have over a citizen who has won the Blood Challenge?"

The Injaabii woman was stuck for an answer, and gazed at the Human, uncomprehending. She shook her head.

"Exactly, Chevria, she cannot," stated Lelltorin coolly.

"But my place - "

"Is wherever, *whatever*, you choose to be." Lelltorin gave a tiny snort, and shook the woman. "One will not change your society, it is true. But one *is* a beginning, and cha' Dallra and cha' Lakri will help you, Chevria. Sister."

Chevria's fierce features regained some part of their haughty grandeur, though not yet in full measure, and her fine gold brows twitched in thought. She set her four-fingered hands on Lelltorin's arms. "I will think on this, sister."

Lelltorin gave her a curt nod of approval, helped her to the bed and released her, then without saying another word strode from the room and through the little gathering of observers. They all left Chevria to reflect upon the food Lelltorin had served to her.

Lelltorin turned to Picard and Crusher once they were out of earshot. "Satisfactory, Jean-Luc, Beverly?" she asked.

Picard returned his attention to the Ambassador. "Interesting tactics, Fliss."

"Yes," Crusher intervened. "I tried that, and it didn't work. Why did it for you?" The Doctor folded her arms, and put her weight on one leg, jutting out her hip.

"Did you try physical contact?" asked Lelltorin.

Crusher shook her head. "Nóoo... lots of reasoning, some shouting and leaving on her own - "

"That might work for Humans, Beverly," explained Lelltorin, "but for Injaabii - " she gave them both a narrow look - "brute force works wonders."

Crusher's mouth twisted wryly. "I'll remember to try it when I next need to."

"God forbid," muttered the Captain feelingly.

"That she'll try it, Jean-Luc, or that she might need to?" enquired Lelltorin gravely, but mischief was in her dark eyes as she smiled at him.

Picard did not share her amusement, and returned the smile with a blank look. He changed the topic. "Shall we go, Fliss?"

"In a minute, Captain," she said, and took one of Crusher's hands in her own. "Beverly, friend and - " she cast a quick glance at Picard - "sister wife."

Picard cleared his throat. "Quite so, Fliss."

Crusher shared the amusement with Lelltorin at the Captain's discomfort, and squeezed her fingers in recognition of the friendship they had grown to share. "I'll be sorry, Fliss, not to be seeing you again," she said.

"Don't be too sure, Beverly," the Ambassador said. "We might meet up again sometime - the galaxy is not nearly so big as we think it is."

Beverly nodded, then in a compulsive gesture hugged Lelltorin briefly. "I'd like that," she smiled. She cast a sneaky glance at Picard. "Maybe we could dish some more dirt?"

Lelltorin answered the medic's smile with one of her own. "Me too. Tell Deanna farewell from me, please, Beverly." Then she went through the doors into the corridor.

Picard patted Crusher on the forearm kindly, and followed.

The ride back to the transporter room did not take very long, and they both found there was little to say to one another. Passing into transporter room three, Picard gave a nod to the ensign at the controls, and she obeyed, beating a hasty exit to the passageway. For a long moment, the Captain and the Ambassador stood without speaking.

Lelltorin spoke first. "Jean-Luc," she said softly, "let's not make it another twelve years before we see each other again."

Picard checked the control panel before he looked up to the silver-haired woman he found so fascinating. He came from behind the console and stood directly in front of her without touching. "Fliss..." His words were halted by a gentle hand against his mouth.

Lelltorin slid her arms around his neck, and brushed her mouth softly against his lips. The kiss was warm, and very sweet, but restrained. "Don't say anything you don't mean, Captain," she admonished.

Picard glanced down into velvety, dark eyes, and tightened his arms around her. "Felicity, you are the most impossible woman I've ever met, and one of the most... remarkable." He returned the kiss fleetingly, with more vigour, then resolutely moved away to the controls. "Are you ready, Ambassador?" he asked as he took up position.

Felicity Lelltorin replaced the Injaabii veil carefully, and nodded once. "Yes, Captain." She curved her mouth gently at the corners. "Au revoir, mon Capitain."

Picard slid his fingers across the panel, and watched the sparkle take her. Long after the lights had dimmed he still stood there looking at the empty platform, the memory of that last kiss clear in his mind. It would be, he supposed, for a long time.

Shaking himself from his reverie, the Captain of the Enterprise made his way back to the bridge, and the final solution to the Injaabii problem.

Captain's Log, Stardate 48958.3: We are heading back to Starbase 94 in the hope of some well-earned rest and relaxation. I have commendations for Commanders Geordi La Forge and Data, as well as for the C.M.O., Beverly Crusher, and her staff.

We have one unexpected passenger - Chevria. She decided she wanted to see more of the Federation, and as she now has no ties to Injaab... As an independently rich woman, Chevria is able to go where she wishes, and with her as instructor travels cha' Lakri. I can only hope she will find her place, as I hope Injaab will find its place too.

The Tretharian is finally proven to be innocent, and it is with relief that I can report it perfectly safe for the myriads of people who will need it in their colonisation of new worlds. It is difficult enough to make a home on a new world, but without the help of drugs like Tretharian it would be so much harder.

Rorg strutted around the weapon he was so proudly displaying for his superiors. "This," he said with relish, "is what we took from the Federation at the cost of a few milligrams of a useless perfume."

The elder Ferengi regarded this obnoxious upstart with creditable patience, and directed his attention to the machine sitting on the floor of the trading chamber. "Junk," he announced, dismissing the 'weapon' and Rorg in a single word.

Rorg gazed open-mouthed at the elder, and scowled. "No, it cannot be. Picard - "

"Ahhh!" the Elder breathed and nodded his head. "Picard. We know of this Human. He can trade almost like one of us." He rapped the highly polished surface of the object with a finger. "But, Daimon Rorg, *this* is still junk. Utterly worthless." He twitched his fingers, and several guards came running. Indicating the raging Rorg, the Elder said, "Remove this from the trading chamber, and ensure that he is barred from all trade routes for - " he paused while he thought of a severe enough punishment - "at least a decade."

The guards seized hold of Rorg and dragged him unceremoniously towards the hallowed portals of the chamber. Rorg did not go easily, and his screams of outrage could be heard to echo for a long time after.

Elder Dirak scowled as the noise faded. The loss of the Tretharian was the biggest failure, and he could feel the repercussions starting their inevitable roll. *He* had better hasten to ensure his and his triad's best interests by ensuring there were no loose ends for anyone to pick up.

This thought uppermost in his mind, Dirak scurried off to do whatever he could.

